Pact 2140

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Written by Daniel Esprit.

I am taking off layer after layer, until at last . . . I do not know how to describe it, but I know this: through the process of gradual divestment I reach the final, indivisible, firm, radiant point, and this point says: I am! like a pearl ring embedded in a shark's gory fat — my eternal, my eternal . . . and this point is enough for me — actually nothing more is necessary.

Vladimir Nabokov, Invitation to a Beheading

Chapter 1. There You Are

They pulled up to the building at the same time as the strike unit. Mark recognized their van instantly—Stretch and Mouth, as he'd come to think of them. Their helmets swallowed their faces, leaving only tinted plastic and a narrow glass visor where eyes should have been.

Stretch gave Mark and Diana a curt nod; Mouth went straight for the entrance.

"What are we looking at?" Mark asked.

"Junkie, most likely," Mouth said. Filtered through the vocoder, his voice sounded detached, hollow. "Beating his old lady again. Thank God, it's the last call tonight."

The stairwell hit them with a dying bulb and walls drowned in graffiti. The light flickered, carving pockets of darkness between the landings. On the second floor, something crashed—plates, maybe—and someone shouted in pain or fury.

"Police!" Stretch barked, and kicked the door in. With his bionic leg, he broke things like that almost elegantly.

Mouth slipped inside first. For a split second, the noise vanished above them—then a dry burst of automatic fire tore through the silence. A woman's ragged sobbing seeped into the ringing that followed.

"Clear!" he called.

Mark went in after Diana. The smell hit him immediately: sour tobacco, ammonia, the stale heat of a room left to rot. He grimaced. Diana still held her gun raised. She was short and solidly built, moving with the calm precision of someone who had done this too many times.

"You should've brought a drone too," Mark muttered.

The room looked shaken apart—overturned furniture, glass everywhere. A heavyset man in underwear lay bleeding out, limbs twitching,

mouth working uselessly for air. Beside him, a half-naked woman crouched on the floor, hugging her knees, shivering and sobbing.

"Same shit every time," Stretch said. Without the helmet, he would have spat on the floor.

"Alright, step aside," Diana said, pulling a drone from her bag.

Damn it. She really had brought one. What the hell — have they started stitching drone protocols into the patches?

They never used to take drones to calls like this.

A thin, transparent strip ran from her temple to the back of her skull, and a faint neon shimmer pulsed beneath the skin. The blue light flickered unevenly—flaring in sharp spasms, then spreading into a web of fine cracks.

Mark had told her more than once: patches weren't an upgrade, they were a leash. Sure, they promised quicker thinking and direct access to the Net, but he saw only one thing—another thread for someone up top to pull.

The drone woke with a soft whirr, blades brushing the stale air, then drifted smoothly over the dead body, recording everything.

"Looks like you've got this," Mark muttered.

"I do," Diana said. Her lips twitched with a thin, dismissive smile.

The metallic tang of blood thickened the air, left a rusty taste on his tongue. The woman's drawn-out sobbing made Mark nauseous. He leaned against the wall, feeling the paint crumble under his hand.

"Go get some air," Stretch offered, almost kindly. "Nothing to do here anyway. Our detective will handle the report herself."

"As always," Mark echoed.

What's next—gonna flirt with her? Detective. Yeah, look at him.

Mark stepped out onto the landing just as a door down the hall clicked shut. Curious neighbors.

Yeah. Probably the ones who called them. On a Friday night, damn them.

Through a cracked window, he could see Eastside. A thin, sticky drizzle clung to the air; heavy leaden clouds were gathering above the rooftops. Real rain was coming soon. Rows of concrete housing blocks stretched into the distance, ending where the rot of the Old City began. From here the whole Ring looked the same—gray, burned-out by time. Even the stub-

born weeds pushing through the asphalt looked as lifeless as the buildings around them.

Mark needed air. Higher—anywhere above the crying and the drone's insect hum leaking through the doors. He trudged up the stairs. How many floors? Ten? More? He just needed the roof—the one place that didn't stink of old iron and decay, where he could push the rusted smog out of his lungs.

"Mark, go home," Diana called from below. "I'll finish this."

He hesitated. Something in her voice... almost an apology.

Diana had always aimed for the Center—young, ambitious. For her, the police were only a rung on the ladder. The police didn't catch criminals; they ticked boxes on digital forms while the Ring slowly sank into its own grave. It was work for people like Mark—people without ambition. And he was only thirty-eight.

Correction: already thirty-eight.

In the City—this spotless City—there were no crimes. And the Ring? No one cared. The Ring didn't care either.

He climbed another flight. Thick layers of dust covered the steps—no one lived this high.

After their breakup, Diana had patched herself. Now part of her brain was synthetic—ten percent, supposedly. Mark did the math: that made it about a year and a half.

Maybe he was being unfair. Or maybe she really had changed since then—more detached, colder somehow.

Not that it mattered anymore.

Another floor.

"They built so much crap here," Mark muttered.

Hatred had become a habit—for the job, for the sterile shine of the City, for the hopelessness of the Ring. There was nothing else left in him.

He stopped and lifted his head. Seven flights? Eight? He had lost count, and the stairs kept stretching upward, pulling him deeper into the dusty darkness. Each step left a clean imprint—too clean, like footprints on fresh snow.

Concrete grit crackled underfoot—like the bones of the ones who built this place. During the war they had put up everything they could: facto-

ries, firing ranges, concrete blocks, as if you could brute-force victory out of concrete. Back then, the Ring was still part of the City, and they called it a state.

Twenty years had passed—and the whole place was collapsing, sagging into dust.

All that remained was the Ring. The City shone on its own now. There was no need for states anymore.

"And thank God for that," Mark muttered.

Two more floors.

He ran his hand along the wall. Along with crumbling plaster, his fingers came away smeared in black soot—factory smoke that had eaten into the building for decades. The war still lived here, soaked into the concrete like a smell. Even he, back then just a kid, had caught the tail end of it. Eighteen—the perfect age to step into a meat grinder and come out breathing.

What if he just stepped out a window? It would be almost funny—falling straight onto the strike team's armored van and leaving a dent. Or right off the roof?

He'd seen that before—an unpleasant sight, and hell to repair the vehicle afterward. Stretch would say something like, "Poor bastard, the job finally got to him." And Diana would document the death with clinical precision. With a drone, naturally.

The thought amused him.

His cuff vibrated, faint light blooming across his wrist. A direct message. Of course, it was Diana. A delayed pang of guilt touched him—he hadn't treated her well tonight. Not that she was at fault. For anything. Including the breakup.

"What is it?" he asked.

A murky shimmer rose before his face—his holo-screen. Letters trembled in the dusty air like reflections in standing water:

"When will you finally get up here? I'm waiting."

Mark squinted, rereading. The sender field was blank.

"What the hell? Who's this from?"

"Unable to identify sender," the comm replied in its politely neutral tone. "Source within a three-hundred-and-fifty-meter radius. Would you like me to scan the area so you can try jumping off the roof?"

Did it really say that, or was he imagining things?

Mark stopped. Rain seeped through a crack in the windowpane, leaving thin dark streaks down the glass. He caught himself counting them: one, two, three...

"No," he said at last.

The stairs kept rising, disappearing into shadow. His heart was hammering harder now; his feet dragged through the dust. How far had he climbed already? Ten flights? Twenty? The ascent would not end.

A flash of reflection flickered in the cracked glass, and Mark turned away. He already knew what he'd see: a gaunt, unshaven face, the shadows under his eyes going violet. That's why Stretch had looked at him like that. Although... how would he even know how he looked at him? The guy wore a helmet.

"How many floors does this building have?" Mark snapped.

"Unfortunately, I have no such information," the system replied cheerfully. "But there seems to be a door to the roof above you."

"About damn time."

Every step felt like dragging the whole cursed building on his shoulders. He stopped, breathing hard. Sweat ran from his temples down his neck beneath his collar. Catching his breath, he pushed himself up the last flight and shoved the metal door. It groaned, then gave way.

A cold wind slapped him in the face.

The rain had picked up. Drops drummed against sheet metal and concrete, pooling in milky puddles collecting in the cracks. Broken antenna pieces lay scattered across the roof, their rusted rods reaching toward the sky like a dead man's stiffened fingers. Nearby, an old drying rack creaked in the wind.

Standard Eastside blocks sprawled deep into the Ring—featureless, identical, nauseatingly uniform. The streetlights below barely pierced the downpour, their halos faint and trembling. In those weak circles shapes moved—people, maybe, or just shadows his mind invented.

On the horizon, beyond the line of the Barrier, the City glowed. White towers stabbed through the rain with steady, immaculate light. It was always daytime there. They knew nothing of this gray filth. The contrast was blinding.

Mark took a deeper breath. His chest loosened—for a moment. The air still smelled of wet metal and distant fire.

Only then did he notice the silhouette on the parapet—a dark figure framed by the dirty-gray sky. She sat motionless, staring toward the City—so still she almost looked built into the concrete. He narrowed his eyes. Against the distant glow, it seemed she was looking straight at him. A cold shiver slid down his back.

Mark took a few steps forward.

Maybe a jumper? Those calls happened too, though rarely. Usually no one bothered with them—too much paperwork, and they ruined the statistics. Saving people wasn't part of the police mandate.

Mark moved closer. The silhouette sharpened into a young woman. She wore a battered leather jacket soaked through with rain, the hood pulled low over her head.

He held his breath. There was something unnervingly calm in the way she sat, as if perching on the edge of a ten-story drop were routine. As if the void beneath her meant nothing at all.

Then she turned her head.

Her face emerged from the hood. Short black hair slicked with rain, and eyes of two different colors—one pale, almost translucent, the other dark as resin. Her gaze held two beings at once: one of light, one of shadow.

She was beautiful—and completely wrong for this rooftop above the filthy Eastside.

"There you are, Mark," she said. Her voice was steady, as if they had paused a conversation only a minute ago.

She noticed his bafflement and pointed at his jacket.

"Your badge."

The metal glinted in the rain, droplets sliding across the engraved letters of his name.

"So that's how it is," he muttered.

"Sit," she said, nodding at the parapet. The word landed like an order.

And he sat—legs dangling over the edge, palms on the cold concrete. The parapet was slick beneath his hand, yet Mark felt no fear. He looked down—and froze.

The familiar ten stories were gone. Beneath the roof yawned a chasm.

The drop was so deep that the two cars parked below looked like dead locusts glued to the ground. One of the headlights flickered, and that tiny spark made the abyss beneath them seem even more immense.

Some kind of trick of the height? As if the building had stretched, its lines bending and pulling away from each other. But what kind of illusion makes cars look like toys?

"I could push you," she said casually, as if commenting on the weather. "It would make everything much simpler."

Mark tensed; his palms pressed instinctively into the wet concrete of the parapet.

But the girl merely pointed toward the City.

"Look."

Beyond Eastside and the impenetrable strip of the Barrier, the City glowed—drowned in surgical white light, too clean to be real. Against the filth of the Ring it looked unreal, a mirage. The towers trembled in the rain, as if keeping their balance on a knife's edge, ready to collapse at the slightest touch. That, at least, had to be an illusion caused by the storm.

"The City," Mark said, and the sound of his own voice felt misplaced, almost foreign.

A stupid remark. He had seen this view a thousand times, but here, on this wet, dark rooftop, he was seeing it for the first time. From here the whole colossal, radiant fact of its existence made no sense. It was a grand backdrop—hollow, stage-like, nothing behind it but cold rain.

"Do you want to destroy it, Mark?" she asked.

The words weren't loud, but they were sharper than anything else around them—louder than the rain, louder than the hum of the eastern generator.

Later, remembering this meeting, he doubted whether it had been a question at all. Maybe she had said: *"You want to destroy it, Mark."* Perhaps the *"you"* had drowned in the thunder.

He turned to her, and from her smile he understood: she already knew the answer.

"To shatter it. Grind it down. Break it. Ruin it," she said slowly, savoring each word. "Crush it. Burn it."

At her words, the air seemed to harden, and time dragged to a halt. Raindrops froze mid-fall, and even the hum of the eastern generator faded into nothing. Only her voice remained—drawing the contours of destruction: towers collapsing, fires blooming, people screaming.

And the real question wasn't who she was, but why she was saying aloud the things he had never dared to let form in his own mind.

To wipe them out.

Kill them.

Make them bleed.

Tear them apart.

Blood.

She kept talking, but the meaning slipped away, dissolving into the rain.

Then her gaze struck him again.

Something inside him clenched tight. Rain kept lashing his face, but Mark no longer felt it. The Ring, the City, the rooftop beneath his feet—everything melted away. Only her eyes remained, and the words that pinned him in place like a nail.

Chapter 2. The One Who Gathers Storms

"Come on!" The girl's shout ripped Mark out of it.

He flinched. A second ago she'd been sitting beside him on the parapet; now she was already by the stairwell door. Her hood had slipped back, coal-black hair gleaming with rain.

"There's going to be a downpour!" she called, her voice cutting through the wind.

Clouds were gathering into a single massive storm above them. The rain thickened into heavy sheets. The City in the distance dissolved behind a solid wall of rain, fading into its own murky glow.

He still felt the rough concrete of the parapet under his hands, and only then realized he was standing — with no memory of when or how he got up. Mark rushed toward the girl without thinking about the storm. She grabbed his hand — her fingers wet, ice-cold — and dragged him along. Not down the stairs, as he had expected, but along the corridor on the top floor.

The walls here were peeling, streaked with moisture; wet trash slid underfoot, blown in through a shattered window.

She stopped at the far door, pulled the handle — it gave way, groaning as a wave of damp decay spilled out.

"Go in," she said, stepping through first.

The room had been lived in once, but it was dead now. Through the gaping window the City burned — its cold light flooding through the cracked glass, slicing the darkness and pulling random details out of hiding: the worn edge of a sofa, the glint of a broken bottle in a stale puddle, a table, a cup with dried leaves stuck to its rim.

Everything else drowned in shadow, as if the room were quietly keeping its secrets from strangers.

Mark crossed the threshold. Something creaked in the dark — furniture settling under the weight of its long-departed owner. The apartment had died years ago, abandoned like the rest of the Ring, yet it still breathed a stale afterlife.

He stopped, staring at the thin bar of light from the window — the only thread connecting this place to the City. The light stabbed at his eyes, exposing the dirt and ruin around him.

True darkness is honest; it doesn't pretend to reveal anything. This light — perfect, alien — seemed to mock him: the City shines, while he rots here, in a decaying corner of the Ring.

The girl stepped closer, and Mark finally saw her face clearly. On the rooftop she had seemed almost like a teenager—fragile, reckless, balancing on the edge of an abyss. But now, up close, he saw how wrong he'd been: she was past thirty. Time had touched her—not with brutal scars, but with a fine web of lines.

Her face was asymmetrical: the right side a little fuller, with a faint scar along the temple where the skin drew tight, as if after surgery; the left marked by deeper lines at the corner of her mouth. Not a disfigurement—something oddly compelling, almost hypnotic.

Fatigue lived in the soft shadows on her face, in the dull sheen of rain-soaked skin. And her eyes... the heterochromia turned them into weapons: the left — bright, electric blue, like a shard of neon; the right — dark, nearly black, swallowing light like a singularity.

Not a ghost, not a girl — a woman. One who knew exactly what she was doing. Nothing about that face felt accidental: the scars were war's signature, and the eyes — a blade of Chaos.

"You'll stay," she said softly, with the same quiet certainty she'd had on the roof.

She'd mapped out every move long before he made it, leaving him only the role she'd chosen.

Mark opened his mouth to protest, but the words caught in his throat.

The air between them thickened, saturated with the scent of wet fabric and a sharp trace of ozone, like the moment after a lightning strike. And then she—like a spider in the middle of its web—tugged the invisible

threads, drawing him in. They were suddenly so close their breath mingled, and any shift became a touch.

He didn't notice how they had ended up by the window—the room itself seemed to push them there, folding in around them. Beyond the cracked glass, distant lights flickered: cold, unmoving. They had no pull. The pull was here, inside. Her presence dragged him in, leaving no room to step back. The warmth radiating from her skin pressed against his will, smothering it. And he understood—it was already too late for resistance.

"I adore the rain," she murmured. "Rain is pure Chaos: it washes away borders, breaks structures, dissolves form. Order holds only until the downpour begins. Then it destroys everything... Just like you."

She smiled faintly. "I'm the one who gathers the storm."

Through the roar of the downpour, her voice came as a whisper—no speech, just a vibration slipping straight into his mind. She leaned into him, and Mark felt the warmth of her body—electric, alive, running along his skin despite the cold bleeding in through the open window.

She smiled, and only the left side of her face responded to the movement: a faint quiver, a seductive curve of the lips, the azure eye catching a sudden spark.

The right side remained still, the dark pupil just as bottomless, just as indifferent. Her power didn't come from wholeness; it seeped out of the fracture. The smile was a key, turning something forbidden inside him—something Mark had tried not to think about for years.

For a heartbeat, something sharp and metallic pressed against his chest—a knife, appearing as if it had grown from her hand. But he no longer cared, not even if she drove it in. The sensation vanished.

The stranger stepped away from him and moved to the table, where a dusty carafe stood with a couple of fingers of liquid at the bottom. She poured two half-measures into forgotten glasses and handed him one. Her fingers brushed his palm for the briefest moment.

Mark downed it without thinking. The liquid scorched his throat with the acrid bite of cheap alcohol mixed with something chemical. The world shifted. It felt less like liquor and more like an elixir that peeled the skin off reality in strips.

The roar of rain outside swallowed every other sound; lightning ripped open the sky. For a split second, her face lit up—the flash catching her eyes, turning the bright one into a ruby.

She set her glass on the table and turned toward Mark. The smile bloomed again—soft, inviting. Warmth from the drink seeped into his blood, and with it came her pull, now almost unbearable.

"You know, Mark," she said softly, "people don't drink to forget. They drink to see what they want to see."

She traced the rim of her glass with a fingertip, and the glass answered with a faint, trembling hum. Mark wanted to ask what she meant, but the words stayed trapped somewhere inside, refusing to surface. All he could do was look into her eyes and feel their quiet, inevitable pull.

Rain drummed against the windowsill — a rhythm echoing inside his chest — and the room folded around her again: around her lips, around that sentence hanging between them like a warning. The walls, soaked with dust and war, bent to her will, tightening into a web where every crack was a thread waiting to catch and never let go of him.

What did she see in him? His hatred for the City? His exhaustion with the Ring? Or something deeper — something he himself kept hidden?

There was no room left for retreat—only the step she'd already calculated.

After that, everything lost its edges. The sound of the rain braided into her breath. She stood so close that even the idea of *too close* stopped meaning anything. Their closeness was not physical but absolute. She consumed him—left him no space, no exit. His own world vanished, becoming part of the mechanism she carried within herself. Two parallel lines didn't just cross—they collapsed into a point.

Later, Mark tried to reconstruct the details, but memory slipped away, leaving fragments: her touch, the mark on her hand—thin lines woven into a pattern, flaring for a heartbeat and then disappearing.

Only the rhythm of the rain remained—heavy, insistent. The walls breathed in time with it, the sound filling the room, drowning his thoughts. Her body—not an image, but a sensation—came in flashes under the lightning: the line of her shoulder, the arc of her neck, the shadow across her stomach. Everything blurred, breaking into shards of light and shadow.

Her touch was warm, burning with life. There was no way to tell where her movements ended and his began; everything merged into a single current. Not the joining of bodies, but the synchrony of rhythm—two separate beats suddenly collapsing into one.

The symbol. Not a tattoo, more like a glimmer—a brief flare before it dissolved, leaving only the troubling certainty that he'd seen it somewhere before.

And then—blackness.

Chapter 3. A Bag of Meat

Mark woke up at home. Above him was the familiar sterile-white plastic ceiling.

As soon as he opened his eyes, a landscape appeared on the windows: a slow river drifting past, birds circling above the water, a forest visible in the distance. The programs updated every week, and Mark had long since memorized every cycle. Today it was "Landscape-6," tomorrow would be "Landscape-7," and after that the "Autumn" sequence would begin.

It seemed like he'd seen real rain last night. Real lightning, too. But the memory broke off, leaving only residue—sticky, like damp concrete under his fingers. He tried to remember how he'd gotten home, and couldn't. His mind snagged on a hollow gap.

The cuff on his arm blinked green, registering his awakening. Mark stared at it and wondered whether that Eastside call had happened at all.

"Did we take a call yesterday?" he asked.

"Good morning, Mark," the system replied immediately. "Yes. Call in the Eastside sector. Time: fifteen oh-two."

"Call confirmed," the apartment added. "Protocol completed successfully. You returned home at sixteen oh-three."

Mark grimaced. What, did they practice this line together?

Both the cuff and the apartment were telling the truth—he knew that. So why was that woman the only thing he could think about?

"What did I do yesterday after the call? List it," Mark said.

"Fifteen oh-seven — arrival at Eastside sector," the system recited in its flat mechanical rhythm. "Fifteen thirty-five — protocol completed. Sixteen oh-three — arrival home. Twenty-one eleven — sleep."

At the same time, it projected fragments of the recordings onto his holo: the apartment, the body on the floor, the car ride home.

"No additional movements detected," the system concluded.

For a moment it seemed as though a hint of mockery slipped through the electronic voice, as if the cuff were saying: "You imagined all of it, you pathetic bag of meat. Machines don't make mistakes. Here's the proof. And what have you got?"

"Nonsense," Mark muttered irritably. "And turn off those stupid windows."

"Done," the apartment replied helpfully.

The river and forest vanished, leaving only dark rectangles of glass. The room became a plastic cell. Better that way. Reality without decorations, without illusions.

"Show me what's outside," Mark said tiredly.

"There's a downpour, sir. It's been an exceptionally rainy year!"

Just like the last twenty or so.

The windows came alive again — this time without a program. The real view appeared: glass towers, sheets of water racing down the panes, a few scattered figures beneath umbrellas.

Whether it was the apartment or the world itself, something was trying to convince him that everything from last night had been nothing but a hallucination, a product of exhaustion and burnout. But underneath, something still echoed: "You want to destroy all of this. You want to see them die. You want to kill every last one of them."

Her voice—quiet, with that strange smile behind it, half-alive, half-dead.

"... Blood... You want them gone, don't you?... Death..."

Mark squeezed his eyes shut, but the voice didn't fade — it kept pulsing in his temples, insistent and rhythmic. He pressed his hands to the sides of his head. A hallucination, delirium — what else could it be? Had to be that fat bastard in his underwear yesterday.

The apartment offered him breakfast. A tray slid silently out of the food dispenser and onto the table: scrambled eggs, a slice of bread, a glass of orange juice. Everything looked perfect—the yolks smooth, the bread evenly browned, the juice a too-bright artificial orange. Mark chewed the bioprinted food without thinking. The egg white had a flawless texture, but in his mouth it felt like tasteless biomatter. Salt hadn't been added to food for years, supposedly for the citizens' health.

As he drank the juice with its faint plastic aftertaste, the cuff activated.

"Attention, Mark. Due to the absence of a patch, your pay rate has been reduced by another ten percent. Current level: minus twenty percent from baseline. I advise you to install a patch."

Mark didn't answer and forced the orange liquid down. He needed to go there in person. It was the only way to know whether it had all been a dream or not. Let the cuff say what it wanted—he remembered her breath, her touch. Who was he supposed to trust: himself or a stupid piece of hardware?

He glanced at the cuff, and the green light blinked back.

"Car," Mark said as he got up. "To the site of yesterday's call."

"Ready."

The doors closed behind him without a sound. Rows of identical doors, that same immaculate cleanliness. Mark descended the stairs. At the entrance, the dark body of the car was already glistening under the rain. Smooth panels with embedded displays, contoured seating. No steering wheel or pedals—unlike the old models still used in the Ring. The seat adjusted to his body, and the cuff's neural link synchronized with the vehicle.

"Route established," the car announced. "Have a pleasant trip."

"Go to hell," Mark said politely. He leaned back and stared out the window.

The City slid past. Towers rose one after another—straight lines of glass and steel. Their perfectly smooth surfaces reflected the sky so clearly that for a moment it seemed as though they weren't buildings at all, but vertical cuts leading straight into the clouds. A mirage-City. A simulation.

The light was diffuse and sullen, and in it everything looked the same—facades, windows, even the people. The City was flawless. And dead.

Mark ran his hand along the car window. Raindrops slid down in blurred streaks, as if the towers were about to melt and disappear. The whole world outside felt like nothing more than a random trace on the glass. Ahead, the line of the Barrier came into view. Beyond it lay the Ring.

At first—a black wall, mute and blank. As they drew closer, Mark made out two gun towers and the silhouette of a guard, motionless, like someone had cut him out of metal. The turret beside him stared into the distance, indifferent to passing vehicles.

The car slowed, went through identification. The cuff blinked on his wrist. The guard looked straight at him. Mark was certain that behind that tinted visor the man was calculating whether to let them through or not. Or did the Contour make the decision instead?

The barrier arm lifted. The car glided forward. The landscape outside changed abruptly.

If the City was steel and glass—perfect, shining—then the Ring was filthy concrete. Rows of identical, half-collapsing buildings. Instead of manicured facades, chipped walls covered in graffiti and streaks of water. Window frames gaped empty, many boarded up with rotting plywood.

The roads were pitted and cratered; rainwater pooled in every depression. The car jolted over seams and potholes, the suspension letting out a low, weary groan.

The Ring was rotting and decaying in its flesh, but blood still ran through the veins of its streets: people huddled under awnings, traded straight out of car trunks, dug through the mud beside old engines and rusted-out machines.

Gangs ruled here. Their marks blackened the walls—crude drawings, rough letters; every sector belonged to someone. Eastside was Ghost territory, and their sign appeared everywhere: a skull with crossed bones.

The familiar tension returned to his body. In the Ring, you couldn't afford to let your guard down.

The car stopped by the same building. The concrete entrance looked even more stripped and peeling than it had yesterday. Rainwater streamed down the walls, leaving dirty streaks behind, and the half-open door creaked helplessly in the wind.

Mark went up the stairs. Each step echoed with memories of damp walls, the trembling ceiling lamp, the crying child behind a door. But something had shifted—subtly, inexplicably—and that made everything feel more unsettling.

On the second floor, he stopped. The door the strike team had kicked in yesterday had been shoved back into the frame, now hanging from a single hinge. Beside it sat the same woman, in an old housecoat, a smoldering cigarette trembling between her fingers.

"You!" she hissed, grabbing Mark by the sleeve. "You killed my husband!"

"No, I didn't kill him, I—" he began, but the words sounded weak even to him.

"Don't lie," she snapped, getting to her feet. "I saw you yesterday, you and your little drone girl. It's all on you. You... you're a bringer of death!"

Not an accusation. A sentence. She wasn't condemning what he'd done—she was naming what he was.

He shrugged. It happens. Yesterday she'd been screaming while her husband beat her half to death, and today she was mourning him and blaming everyone around her. Mark hadn't sold the man drugs. He hadn't pulled the trigger.

Then who had? Probably Mouth.

Standard police cleanup. In the City's engineered idyll, there were no prisons, which meant there was no one to arrest. A threat to society was eliminated. Everyone knew that—even the ones who called the police.

He almost told her to go ask her neighbors why *they* had killed her husband, but he kept silent. Guilt, excuses — none of that had meant anything to him for a long time.

Higher up the staircase, the same damp and dust waited. The building sounded and smelled hollow.

Ten floors — he counted the flights just to be sure. But yesterday there had definitely been more. And the door gave way with the same dry screech. The wind struck him in the face, sharp with déjà vu. The rooftop looked unchanged: cracked concrete, murky oil-slick puddles. Even the old clothesline frame creaked on the same note as it swayed in the wind.

Everything in its place. And at the same time — empty. She wasn't here. He listened to the wind humming through the empty space and realized he was waiting for something. But nothing happened, and nothing could. The cuff had been right.

Mark went back down: top floor, corridor, the door — the same one. He stopped, pulled the handle, and it opened without resistance, just like yesterday. But no one had ever lived in this room. There was no table, no sofa—nothing. Dust lay in a heavy, undisturbed layer built up over years.

Mark cursed under his breath. He should have checked the dust on the stairs to see whether he'd actually come up here yesterday. But that woman had thrown him off. Idiot.

He walked across the room and breathed in the thick, stale air. Behind the window, there were no glowing towers, no flicker of the Barrier's lights. Only Eastside — the same concrete housing blocks and narrow streets, drowned in rain.

There were no signs of anyone ever having lived here. Nothing to find here. Something faint was still visible on the opposite wall: a pale marking. A circle with a broken cross and a tail inside. The lines were uneven, as if someone had scratched them on the old plaster in a hurry. Not paint — a shallow gouge, like a scar.

Mark stepped closer and ran his finger across the mark; the plaster crumbling instantly, falling to the floor in a fine powder. The symbol itself held.

"Some kids' scribbles, maybe?" he muttered, already knowing that wasn't true.

"It does resemble a child's drawing," the system replied immediately. "Stylistically, it does not match gang markings or any known symbols. Probability of spontaneous creation: three percent."

Mark couldn't help himself.

"I wasn't talking to you."

"Apologies," the cuff said calmly. "You asked a question."

It sounded like you were the idiot here.

There was something else in the drawing, something different. He had seen this sign before. Not here, not scratched like this, but he'd definitely seen it. A memory flickered: a hand in the dark, the sound of rain, the same symbol. On her. On the girl from the roof — the mark on her wrist had been exactly this.

But the memory kept offering something more, something left unsaid, just out of reach. At that moment, something rustled in the hallway. A faint sound, like a foot brushing against broken plaster. Mark froze, listening.

A short laugh. A child's laugh. High, sharp, cut off at once, as if someone had clamped a hand over a mouth.

Mark turned sharply. The door was shut. Silence.

He stepped into the hallway.

His steps echoed off the concrete walls, and the dust rose in small clouds. Nothing but his own footprints. No fresh marks, no smudged trails. Only the whisper of rain from the stairwell window — the dull, endless song the Ring never stopped humming.

But he couldn't have imagined that laugh. A child's laugh, bright and ringing — too alive for this dead place. A cold sensation crept over him: someone was playing with him. Without thinking, Mark turned and headed down the stairs. The thud of his boots echoed through the stairwell. He forced himself to walk calmly, evenly. As if he was in no hurry, as if he hadn't heard anything at all.

But the muscles in his legs tightened with every step, and each new step was just a little quicker than the last. His heart was pounding harder.

Mark reached the first floor, pushed the door open, and stepped out into the rain. The car waiting by the entrance flashed its headlights in greeting. He walked toward it with a brisk, purposeful pace, as if hurrying to something important — and only when the door shut behind him did he realize he hadn't been breathing.

Chapter 4. Your Mind in Our System

The car was warm. Safe.

"Go," he exhaled with relief. "Through the Old City."

It would take longer, but the detour would give him time to pull himself together a bit.

The car glided past the standard Eastside housing blocks and turned into the narrow streets of the Old City. The buildings here were low and brick, their paint peeling in long, worn strips — many of them standing since before the war. Neon signs flickered above the sidewalks, their reflections trembling in the puddles; the whole district reeked of dampness.

Workers in soaked jackets trudged along the sidewalks; at the corners, disabled men sat, waiting for whatever anyone might drop into their hands. Most often he saw women carrying heavy bags, hunched against the rain. The smell of fried meat and spices drifted out of the open doors of cheap diners, mixing with the thick, stubborn odor of the Old City — acrid, like rancid oil and rotting fish.

"Filter the air," Mark said. The car hummed in response.

A bar with a blinking sign reading Babylon blasted music loud enough that it thudded even through the closed windows.

"Four already?" Mark muttered, surprised. He had lost half a day, though he couldn't have spent more than an hour in that building.

The cuff didn't answer — sulking, most likely.

The Old City was alive. It was dying, but there was still more life here than on the other side of the Barrier. Mark shifted his feet forward, and the seat adjusted, sliding him back. He caught himself thinking that here, for all the decay, he felt freer.

The car eased through an intersection, and the market came into view. The old stalls stretched beneath rusty awnings and tarpaulin roofs slick with rain.

People crowded around the counters: bargaining, warming their hands over the steam rising from pots. Here they sold things you couldn't buy in the City: real vegetables and fruit — half-rotten but alive — meat from Sector 17 and the farms beyond the Ring, fish wrapped in wet paper sheets. A cheerful old man in a wheelchair showed children the chickens in a cage; they reached toward the bars with eager fingers.

Nearby, vendors sold scrap: tools, machine parts, weapons — everything mixed together on grimy tables. But it was the food that drew people in. Real food — not the synthetic matter printed in the City's pristine labs.

The car turned off the narrow street and rolled out into a square. There stood the generator — a massive concrete block with peeling walls and cooling fins running along its sides. Heavy pipes jutted from the corners, disappearing into the ground and into neighboring districts. Through cracks in the surface seeped a dull, sickly glow. The hum inside it got into his bones — the mechanical heart of the Ring.

They had built these during the war, so each sector could live independently — power, water, communications. Even if the city were torn to pieces, it still wouldn't die.

At the entrance sat armed guards; a pre-war machine gun angled at the sky. Around it lay sandbags stacked into a tidy parapet, and nearby — ammunition crates with faded warehouse markings. A little farther off stood two figures in matching jackets with a white cross on a black field: the Legion. Their mirrored visors tracked every step of the sparse pedestrians and every movement of the passing cars. This wasn't a place to linger. He didn't want trouble, and City vehicles were rare in the Ring.

The generator's low rumble lingered in his ears long after they left the square, like a warning: everything here belonged to someone. And you'd better remember who.

Leaving the cramped, tangled streets of the Old City behind, the car passed back through the Barrier, crossed the checkpoint, and entered the City. This was the corporate district. The transition was so abrupt, Mark instinctively closed his eyes. The narrow alleys and neon signs gave way to towers of glass and metal, their facades shimmering with corporate logos — bright, immaculate. He rarely drove through this sector.

Wide, perfectly even roads stretched between the buildings. Cars glided in silence, unhindered. No dirt, no chaos — just the rhythm of corporations, precise as clockwork.

On the sidewalks walked people in long coats, their faces focused and distant. Everyone hurried somewhere, and the exposed patches at their temples pulsed with faint blue light. There were no chance encounters here — just a well-tuned mechanism where every component knew its place.

Mark glanced upward, and the roof of the car turned transparent. The towers blotted out the sky, reflecting the washed-out clouds above. The rain had vanished — the streams slid down the glass so cleanly that they left neither streaks nor dirt. Even the weather seemed to obey the architecture.

The Ring lived by dying in concrete and chaos; the City had died long ago, turned into a beautiful, spotless imitation of life.

Suddenly the car's display lit up, and the cuff blinked: signal received, data stream active. The City spoke, and the vehicle obeyed.

"Damn it," Mark muttered. He had completely forgotten about the ads in this sector.

"Today only: BioFood nutrition bars with real orange flavor — twenty percent off!"

A holo popped up before him: a perfect family chewing identical bright-orange bars.

"ClearMind health system. Just one patch for your patch — and forget insomnia, stress, and fatigue. Discounts for corporate employees," the ad continued. "Patch your patch!"

The images flickered one after another: faces, brands, slogans. The ads didn't ask permission — they simply played, cutting into his subconscious like part of the City's own breathing.

He wanted to listen to the rain without anyone else's voice intruding, and he closed his eyes.

Rain washes everything away, just like you...

But a ride without ads had to be paid for — or endured.

"Please open your eyes," the car said politely. "You skipped an advertisement."

He obeyed, but the cuff chirped — the charge had already been deducted automatically.

"BioTech — the leader in medical solutions. We don't need advertising — our results speak for themselves. Over a hundred years on the market."

The voice was calm, assured, almost hypnotic.

"BioTech. Your body. Your mind. In our system."

No unnecessary enthusiasm, which made it even more convincing — the corporation wasn't offering anything; it was stating an inevitability.

A logo flared on the holo: a circle, a tree with three branches reaching upward and outward. A snake coiled around the trunk, rising toward the junction of the branches. The symbol glowed evenly, without a flicker. Even the advertisement looked flawless — not a hint of distortion.

"BioTech. We don't offer. We define."

Sharp and final — like a sentence.

Mark stared at the logo — the circle, the clipped cross, the snake. The same sign. The same one he had seen scratched into the wall of that abandoned apartment — crude lines gouged into old plaster, but the essence unmistakable. He'd seen it before — everywhere. Everyone knew the logo.

The mark on her hand surfaced in his memory. He had assumed it was a reflection, a trick of the light. Now there was no doubt.

BioTech was everywhere: on the screens of the corporate district, on the wall of a dead apartment — and on her body. *We don't offer.*

"Tell me about BioTech," he said.

The car replied with noticeable satisfaction:

"BioTech Corporation. Founded in the 2020s by billionaire Damian Lanier. Initially specialized in neural interfaces and brain augmentations. Pioneer of bionics and bioprinting."

In the air, archival footage appeared: Lanier smiling into camera lenses, laboratories with the first patients, children who could finally hear, finally see.

"In the mid–21st century, the corporation became the global leader in restoring brain functions and sensory perception. At the same time, it developed bioprinting of tissues and organs."

The image shifted: soldiers applauding Lanier with their bionic hands.

"During the Great War of 2101–2120 the corporation became the main contractor for the Western coalition. It developed combat patches for soldiers — replacing up to one-third of the brain, controlling emotions, ac-

celerating reactions. It created new-generation bioprinters capable of printing organs — and, eventually, even entire bodies."

On the battlefield, the soldiers moved in perfect unison, like machines.

"After the war and the collapse of nation-states, the corporation founded the City Committee and opened branches in every City on the continent. Main areas: patches, bioprinters, medical services. Slogan: 'Your body. Your mind. In our system.'"

The car paused for a moment.

"Today, BioTech is one of the four members of the Committee. It controls biological maintenance — and the citizens' entire life cycle, from first scan to last."

"Tell me about their logo," Mark said.

"The BioTech logo is built on the image of the 'Tree of Life,'" the car continued. "The central trunk divides into three branches, symbolizing body, mind, and progress. A snake coils around the trunk — a sign of knowledge and medicine."

The familiar emblem flared again.

"The symbol is meant to represent the harmony of science and nature," it concluded.

The tree with its branches concealed the same mark he had seen in the apartment — ancient, ominous, older than medicine itself.

"Search for similar symbols," he said, then paused for a moment and added, "Maybe ancient ones."

The car hesitated for a second, and the holo flickered out.

"This information is not available," it said at last.

"How do you think..." he began automatically, turning to his cuff.

And immediately caught himself: he did it far too often. Far too naturally. He spoke to them as if they were real people. A little more — and he would start believing the cuff actually thought like a human being.

The green light blinked back at him, patiently awaiting a command. Mark brushed his fingers over his wrist, feeling the coolness of metal against his skin. And what if the cuff had been thinking *for him* all along?

"...how do I learn more about the logo?" he finished. "Maybe I should talk to someone from BioTech?"

As soon as he said it aloud, he froze up. The word *talk* — a key word, a dangerous trigger. Advertising could flow both ways. And now the trigger had probably fired. The cuff blinked green.

"I can locate the nearest corporate office," it said. "I can connect you to—"

"Don't." Mark cut it off sharply.

The cuff fell silent, but the uneasy feeling didn't leave him: one more step, and he would be on display. BioTech would know he'd been looking into their symbol.

Or they already knew? A cold shiver ran down his back. In the City, everything was recorded — through cameras, wristbands, cars, apartments. Even kettles and lamps.

The call came suddenly, sharp as a gunshot. The cuff blinked, and in the air the same logo flared once more.

"Good afternoon, Mark," a soft female voice said, neutral and friendly. "I'm Amy, and I work with BioTech."

A surge of anger tightened his chest. There it was — the hook in his mouth.

"We noticed your interest in our corporation," she continued, a hint of satisfaction slipping through. "Please confirm which question is most relevant for you? Are you interested in our implants, our patches? Or perhaps... something more specific?"

She spoke politely, without a trace of pressure.

An image flashed before him: a hand clenching into a fist, the soft glow of lenses — a visor built directly into the retina. Then the slogan again.

"I wanted..." Mark hesitated. The word *logo* hovered on his tongue. "To speak with your management."

Silence filled the line; only the whisper of the tires on wet asphalt remained.

"Of course, Mark," Amy replied smoothly, maintaining that perfectly corporate tone. "I can redirect you to a request handler. But first I need to clarify the topic: implants, patches, or bioprinters?"

Options floated into view on the holo, each neatly framed in white.

"Implants. Patches. Bioprinters. For you."

Too quick. Too polite. They knew exactly what he wanted to ask, yet they offered only safe choices.

"No... with management," he repeated unevenly.

Amy fell silent for a moment. Not a pause — time to decide.

"I understand, Mark. You wish to speak with Miss Lily Thorne, Chairwoman of the City Committee and director of our corporation," Amy finally replied, listing every title with deliberate clarity. "Contact with executive leadership is available only through secure channels. Verification will be required, as well as a visit to our main office."

An address appeared in the air — the BioTech tower in the corporate district, encircled by glowing logos.

"Would you like to schedule an appointment?" she asked.

This was what they'd been waiting for.

"Yes... of course," he managed.

"Excellent," Amy said warmly. "We are always pleased to cooperate with the protectors of our City."

The holo and the car's display lit up simultaneously:

Appointment confirmed. BioTech, Corporate District. 8:00 p.m.

The hollow feeling in his chest was disturbingly close to fear. Amy hadn't coordinated anything — as if directors and chairwomen didn't have their schedules planned months in advance. As if the meeting had been arranged long before he'd said *yes*.

Outside the window, the streets slid by as dark fissures in the quiet.

Go? Yes, without hesitation.

Life had long since lost any meaning, reduced to a ritual of empty motions. But this meeting, real or not, had become the only proof that an exit was possible.

To the corporate district, straight to the BioTech tower. Maybe there he would find an answer. There was no other way to find her. Not really. In the Ring there were no cameras, and without a photo he could search the databases forever.

The district ended, and with it the advertisements vanished. He was free to close his eyes. In the City, everything was decided and arranged in advance. His response had already been anticipated and placed in someone's calendar long before the call.

They had been waiting for him all along.

Chapter 5. Yubitsume

Evening slid down on the City with the rain. The daytime downpour had exhausted itself and dissolved into a dense mist, a suspended dust of water hanging in the air. Thin, almost invisible strands of moisture clung to the glass, and the tower lights slid down the windows like neon tears, turning the world beyond into a blurred, impressionistic haze.

The car — a black, soundless capsule — drifted through this chaos with inhuman smoothness, its sensors reading a road no passenger could see. With a quiet hiss, it parted the water, slicing through the rain.

Ahead, among the seven highest towers of dark glass and steel, each shimmering with the sickly reflections of the City's lights, one building stood apart — BioTech. It rose at least half again as tall as the others, its matte walls glowing faintly from within, a soft pearlescent shimmer in the dusk. An alien organism fused into the City's flesh. Above the entrance, suspended in the air between the ground and the second floor, floated the logo. A perfect halo of order, a holographic cut in the dark.

The car came to a stop. Its lifeless voice announced:

"You have arrived. Your meeting is scheduled for eight p.m."

Cold droplets whipped across his face; the smell in the air was different here — not the smoke and wet concrete of the Ring, but sterile plastic and a faint ozone from the filters. Underfoot, no mud, only illuminated glass plates leading toward the transparent doors.

Security stood at the entrance. Their armor caught the neon light and threw it back in distorted reflections, turning titanium plating into something out of an old science-fiction film. In their hands — the newest generation of rifles; their faces sealed behind helmets. When he walked past, the scanners would read his breath, his pulse — maybe even his thoughts.

The cuff on his wrist blinked.

"Welcome to BioTech, Mark," said a woman's voice. The same one that had called him earlier that day.

The glass doors slid apart without a sound. Inside — a brightness so sharp it seemed to erase depth itself; the whiteness of the corridor flattened everything: the lines of the floor, the shimmering columns, the endless BioTech logos repeating along the walls like a silent mantra. Protective sigils. Not decor, but a spell of authority — a brand burned into the flesh of the building.

Even the smell was white, barely there: not air, but the filtered whisper of air.

Mark stepped across the threshold. The rain stayed behind him, severed by the glass barrier.

The light in the hall burned away every shadow, leaving him exposed, almost stripped bare. He was used to the dirty half-darkness — that was his natural element. Here, it felt as though they were preparing to dissect him under a microscope.

"Proceed to the elevator," the system instructed. The building itself was speaking through it.

From the toes of his boots, a thin line of light shot out, splitting into arrows that didn't invite him so much as pull him deeper into the glass labyrinth. At the end of the corridor, an elevator opened — a sterile chamber grown into the wall. Inside, a woman was waiting.

"Good evening, Mark," she said. "I'm Amy, assistant to the Director. She's expecting you."

The embodiment of a corporate standard: platinum-blond hair pulled into a flawless knot, a symmetrical face with perfectly balanced features. A poster-girl kind of beauty — appealing, but stripped of individuality. A thin cuff flashed on her wrist, likely studded with diamonds.

She turned toward him slightly — a calculated gesture of courtesy. Her lips curved into a perfectly measured smile, two faint dimples forming on her cheeks. And in that fleeting moment, something else slipped through — a lightness, almost girlish, that had nothing to do with the cold, polished mask of the Director's assistant. A shadow of genuine, human emotion glimmered and vanished before he could grasp it, but Mark had seen it.

That dissonance was the only living trait in her otherwise sterile presentation.

Not patched. Interesting.

There were no buttons: matte surfaces reflected silhouettes, as if the elevator were carrying shadows, not people. The doors sealed, and the cabin rose without a lurch or a sound; only a subtle heaviness in the pit of his stomach revealed they were moving at all.

Amy stood perfectly straight, hands folded neatly at her waist. In the panel to her right, her reflection wavered — as if the image of a human being hadn't rendered properly. Something about it felt not just artificial, but unsettling.

"Ms. Thorne will receive you on the upper level," she said when the cabin slowed almost imperceptibly.

The elevator doors parted, opening onto a new corridor. Here the light was softer, free of glare; nothing cast shadows. The click of Amy's heels was muted by the cushioned floor underfoot.

They walked twenty meters or so. On the right stretched a glass partition; beyond it, an empty gallery with sparse plants growing in identical gray containers — either mutants or relics dragged back through technology. To the left, a smooth wall extended, marked at regular intervals by the same motif: a tree and a serpent. Light threaded through the emblem, making each symbol glow from within.

Amy halted before a massive door. The sensor above the handle flashed green for an instant — recognizing both their cuffs at once.

"Please," she said, stepping half a pace aside to clear his way.

The door slid soundlessly into the wall. Mark entered first; Amy followed.

The office impressed not by its size, but by its emptiness. A single wall-spanning window served as the room's only artwork: a panorama of the City below, carved into perfect lines of roads, blurred by threads of rain. It looked two-dimensional, like a map. No sound from the streets penetrated here. In the center of this sterile space, like a lone exhibit, stood a desk. As in the elevator, the air held no scent at all.

Behind the desk sat Lily Thorne — the perfect completion of that emptiness. Immaculate porcelain skin, long black hair, sculpted facial fea-

tures. Her beauty carried no life, like a statue carved to an ideal template. Even her expensive clothing, tailored with engineering precision, felt less like attire and more like a uniform of absolute authority.

Mark knew her youth was a carefully maintained illusion masking her true age. He saw it in the faint, unnatural exactness of her movements. Not a flaw — a form of control so absolute it had become one.

"Ah, Mark," Lily said almost warmly, as if greeting an old acquaintance. "Mark Kane. Second precinct. Thirty-eight years old. Twenty years of service. War veteran. Correct?"

Tilting her head slightly, she rose, and her black eyes glimmered with a trace of amusement.

"Sit."

Amy remained by the door while Mark approached the desk. A chair slid out from beneath the surface without a sound, stopping at a perfectly calculated distance. The armrests were dry and smooth — as if no human hand had ever touched them.

Everything here was flawless, devoid of even the faintest trace of human presence.

Lily didn't sit. She remained standing, one hand resting lightly on the desk, fingers spread — the posture of someone who is used to ruling. A standard tactic: establish dominance in the first seconds.

There were no papers, no devices on the desk. Along the edge, faint indicator lights pulsed — the quiet breathing of a machine hidden inside.

"You wanted to meet with me," Lily said. "Where shall we begin? No, let me guess. A transfer to the Center? Almost twenty years in uniform — it's about time, isn't it?"

For a brief moment, Mark faltered. He opened his mouth to object, but the words stuck to his tongue.

"No..." he finally forced out. "That's not why I came."

"Oh, you're conducting an investigation?" Lily tilted her head slightly, the corner of her mouth lifting. Almost a smirk — the entire situation amused her far more than it concerned her.

A deliberate mockery. The police hadn't conducted investigations in decades, and Lily was clearly trying to unbalance him.

She circled the desk — soundless, like a precision mechanism, and sat on its edge, facing him, turning her body just enough, settling down as carefully as if she were lowering herself onto the back of some exotic creature. The desk — a patient beast beneath its mistress, pretending calm before the lunge.

The fabric of her skirt tightened, and Mark couldn't help noticing: even the angle of her hips and the fall of the cloth were calculated. Not vulgar, not overt — just enough to draw the eye.

"Then what is it you want, Mark?" she asked softly.

"It's about your logo," Mark said. He paused. "Or rather... about the woman who has it on her wrist."

Her face remained fixed in that cool, faintly ironic expression, though he watched her closely, hoping to catch even the slightest shift.

"Our employees don't wear the company logo on their hands," she replied evenly. "What exactly did you see? A patch? An image on clothing? A tattoo?"

Her tone stayed impeccably polite, but her gaze sharpened, as if she genuinely wanted to assist with such a delicate matter.

"Something like a tattoo," Mark clarified. "But... not exactly."

It sounded foolish, as if even he didn't quite understand what he'd seen himself.

"It's flattering to hear that someone would tattoo our symbol," Lily said with the polished smile of a corporate poster. "You know we help people, especially the disabled. Perhaps someone truly did it as a gesture of gratitude. A lovely thought. If you find this person, we'd be happy to meet them and offer a collaboration."

Her knee brushed his — accidentally. Except nothing in this place ever happened by accident.

"Describe this person, please."

"A woman. About thirty. Thin. Short black hair. Heterochromia. The mark was on the back of her hand."

Lily listened without blinking, as if committing every detail to memory.

"And why are you looking for her?" she asked, calm and not pressing, as though they were discussing something entirely mundane.

But the tension in the air grew thicker. This wasn't a formality anymore — it was a probe. A test.

What was she trying to learn — and why?

What could he possibly tell her? That he'd met the woman on a rooftop during what might well have been a hallucination? That she spoke of destroying the City? That he could think of nothing else since?

Lily seemed to read all of that straight off his face.

"You like her," she observed. "How interesting. Did you sleep with her? That would explain quite a lot."

Mark looked away — and that was enough.

Lily leaned back, and for the first time something like a satisfied smirk curved her lips.

"Fine," she said suddenly. She shifted slightly, her voice almost... confiding. "Let's assume I know her. Let's also assume I know where she is. But every deal requires an exchange."

A brief pause — letting the words settle and tighten around him.

"And what can *you* possibly offer *me*?" she asked, the softness gone, replaced by steel.

He was trapped. He'd come here to ask, and had nothing to give. And Lily knew it.

"You know," she went on, "I'm not without a romantic streak myself. So I'll be generous. Show me proof — real proof — that your interest in her isn't hollow."

She stepped back to the desk, bent, retrieved something. Metal glinted — a blade. Double-edged, with a dark wooden handle, too elegant to be just a knife. She placed it on the desk and pushed it toward him with one fluid gesture. The knife slid and came to rest precisely before him.

"Prove it," she ordered.

"... Prove what, exactly?" Mark asked, thrown off balance.

The atmosphere shifted in an instant; the conversation had turned into a trial with rules he didn't yet understand.

"You know," Lily said, rubbing her fingers lightly as if she still held an invisible handle, "the yakuza had a ritual. A finger for loyalty, a finger for guilt. A man did it himself and handed over a part of his body to the one he owed."

She made a small gesture, miming the downward strike of a blade.

"In your case, it's much simpler. You'll prove to me that this woman matters to you. Or"—her smile deepened just a fraction—"say, you'll pay in advance for a betrayal you haven't committed yet. Everyone betrays, sooner or later. It's just timing."

Her expression hovered somewhere between friendly and predatory. Mark looked at the knife again.

"I'm not cutting off my finger," he said, voice low. "You're... insane."

The last word came out firmer than he expected, as though he'd finally found a border he would not cross. Lily lifted one eyebrow, almost delicately.

"Am I insane?" she echoed, stretching the words as if tasting them. "Perhaps. But there's more meaning in this supposed madness than in your twenty years of service, Mark."

She swept her hand around the office — the panoramic windows, the city spread beneath her like obedient circuitry.

"And besides... look where I am. And look where you are."

The line hit harder than he expected. There was nothing to throw back.

"So," she concluded crisply, "either you do it, or you get nothing. No name. No location."

Her face sealed itself back into that flawless, unreadable mask as she leaned forward.

"The choice is yours, Kane. One stroke of the blade — and you get what you want."

The rain outside slashed the City in crooked lines. Mark felt it with the back of his skull: Amy was standing by the door — motionless, an obliging shadow, observing everything without emotion. In the polished metal of the blade he caught a flicker of Lily's face — carved with scars, her eye sockets black hollows, a monstrous grin ripping across the ruined features. A hallucination.

"Well?" Lily pressed, her voice edged with impatience. "I'm offering a choice. The decision is yours."

The girl on the rooftop flashed through his mind. For the first time in years, someone had spoken aloud the things he had been afraid to even

think about. For the first time, he hadn't felt alone. Step forward — or rot in the Ring. There was no third path for him.

Everything felt like a fever dream — unreal, deranged, as if he were trapped in a nightmare where someone else dictated the rules.

His hand closed around the knife before the thought had fully formed. He placed his hand on the table and brought the blade down on his pinky. Steel split bone and bit into the desk; pain detonated behind his eyes as blood splashed across the immaculate surface and the severed piece of finger dropped to the floor.

Mark clamped his other hand over the wound, warm blood leaking between his fingers. His breath came ragged; his heart hammered against his skull. A dark stain spread across the white tabletop. Barely holding back a groan, he remained frozen, shaking, blood-soaked hand pressed against the mangled finger. Pain pulsed in rhythm with his heartbeat. His chair and jacket were drenched.

"You see how easy it is?" Lily said serenely. "You choose, and you accept the consequence. Curious that you've only now decided to make one."

Her gaze drifted over the spreading stain on the white table, the knife jutting from the surface. Then, with a faint note of regret:

"By the way, you ruined the desk. You were supposed to do it on the armrest."

Lily turned toward the window.

"Amy, escort our guest downstairs."

Amy responded with a brief nod and stepped closer to Mark. She pulled a slim aerosol can from her purse and sprayed it onto the wound. The cold mist burned against the torn skin; the blood sealed instantly, and the sharp pain collapsed into a dull, throbbing pressure.

"Temporary," she explained with a faint smile. "You'll be fine soon. Follow me."

She gave Mark a pleasantly warm look, as if what had happened a minute ago were nothing more than an amusing performance. She'd clearly enjoyed the show. Clutching his injured hand, he rose from the chair.

They walked in silence. The elevator slid downward with effortless smoothness; the white panels reflected their blurred faces. Mark pressed his wounded hand to his chest — that made the throbbing bearable.

The doors opened onto the parking level. The wide space was as sterile as the rest of the building: perfect rows of cars, muted white light without shadows, the monotonous hum of the ventilation.

"Yours is there. I'll take you to it," Amy said, her tone businesslike, neutral.

The car lit its headlights, recognizing the cuff; the bright beams carved their silhouettes out of the dimness.

"Babylon Bar. Tomorrow," Amy said. She inclined her head slightly — a gesture with a hint of Japanese ritual — almost a bow.

For an instant something alive, something warm flickered in her again, but vanished immediately.

Mark reached for the door — and suddenly caught a sound. A dull, insistent knocking, as if something were desperately pounding somewhere deep inside the building or beneath the ground. He froze, listening.

Amy stood beside him without changing her expression. She either didn't hear it — or pretended not to.

The knocking came again — louder this time, more insistent. Mark turned, searching for the source.

"Open the window, Mark," Amy said calmly.

The world shattered like a dream. Amy, the parking level, the walls — gone. The windshield was once again a waterfall of rain, the familiar dashboard glowing faintly. He was sitting in his car, and a security officer in full gear was rapping impatiently on the side window.

"You've been parked here for over an hour, citizen," the officer barked through the narrow crack as the window slid down. His face was hidden behind the helmet, but the irritation in his voice was unmistakable. "Clear the area, or we'll have to remove you."

Rain hammered down, breaking the headlights into jagged slants of light. Mark glanced at his pinky: the finger was intact, the skin smooth, no trace of a cut. He ran his other hand across the place where the wound had been seconds ago — nothing. And yet the pain pulsed in memory, so vivid he clenched his teeth by reflex. He flexed his fingers — all intact.

A metallic tang clung to his tongue, and something deep in the bone still throbbed. The dashboard clock read 9:11 p.m. — he had missed his meeting with Lily. Rain drummed on the roof in a relentless, rapid staccato.

"Home," he told the car.

The headlights carved a pale wedge into the wet darkness, and the vehicle slid forward into the night-soaked haze of the City.

Intermission 1. Lily

When the door closed behind Amy, Lily stayed seated in the chair by the panoramic window, her face turned toward the City.

The rain hadn't stopped. Heavy, sluggish drops crawled down the reinforced glass, warping the world beyond it. The City dissolved into a blurred kaleidoscope of lights — red, white, blue, all bleeding together. Each drop was a lens bending and collecting reality anew. Every light was not a lamp, not a window, but a life. A desire. A fear. Millions of trembling sparks locked inside concrete cells.

Her face stayed perfectly still — an immaculate porcelain mask, betraying neither regret nor anything else. Only deep within the black of her eyes did something flicker for an instant — a shadow of cold satisfaction.

The door opened, and a young employee in strict corporate attire stepped in, carefully leading a girl of about seventeen by the hand — pale hair, hollow features, a tired, drawn face.

"Miss Thorne," the woman said respectfully, then faltered. "Forgive me for disturbing you..."

"Yes, Stella," Lily replied, indifferent, without turning.

"This is my sister, Angela," Stella continued, her voice barely steady. "I told Amy about her. Ever since... it happened... she hasn't cried. She just sits and stares at the wall for hours."

Lily turned in her chair. Her gaze slid over Angela's fragile figure — pale, motionless, like a porcelain doll abandoned in an empty gallery.

"Very well," she said. "She may stay. And call Amy."

Stella nodded, guiding her sister a few steps forward before letting go. Angela stood frozen in the middle of the room, small and lost against the citywide panorama.

Lily watched her with cool detachment — as though she were studying an exhibit.

"You're dismissed, Stella."

Stella hesitated for a heartbeat, wanting to say something to her sister — then thought better of it and left. The door closed, and silence flooded the office.

Without taking her eyes off the motionless girl, Lily leaned back in her chair.

"Come closer."

Angela stepped forward uncertainly, trying to stand up straight, her whole body trembling.

"Strip," Lily said. "And lie down on the table."

Angela's lips quivered soundlessly. Her fingers fumbled with the fabric, with the buttons that wouldn't come undone. Lily watched her without blinking, with the cold interest of a predator.

By the time Angela lay on the gleaming surface of the table, Amy had already entered the room. She paused at the threshold, taking in the scene: the stripped girl, Lily in her chair. Amy's face remained perfectly neutral.

"You want this, don't you?" Lily asked softly.

Angela gave the faintest nod.

Lily rose, and the same knife slipped into her hand. With one precise motion, she drove it into the girl's chest.

Angela gasped — a short, shocked breath — her body arching as instinct fought in vain. Her legs kicked weakly against the table before her strength ebbed, her movements jerking once, twice — and then fading into stillness. Blood gushed out, flooding the white table. Angela struggled to breathe, but her movements grew weaker with every second, until her body jerked in a final spasm of agony.

Amy did not react, simply stepped closer. Lily watched the girl's dimming eyes as though studying the last flickers of something leaving.

"Beautiful girl," she remarked in a matter-of-fact tone. "Punctured myocardium. Left ventricle and atrium. If blood flow ceases, death follows in seconds."

"You were always better at anatomy than I was," Amy remarked with a slight, almost playful smile, as if they were discussing exam results. "And please — be careful. Don't stain the walls again. I had to replace the panels last time."

Lily slipped out of her dress with measured grace, leaned over the body — and the wet rip of tearing flesh and the dry crack of bone filled the silence. Every movement she made sounded loud in the silence.

Amy stood beside her, waiting patiently.

When everything finally fell silent, Lily straightened. Her face had become a crimson mask; fresh blood gleamed on her lips and ran in hot streams down her chest and ribs. She didn't seem to notice. Moving slowly, she walked toward the window, leaving a trail of dark, spreading footprints on the floor.

She pushed open the glass door and stepped onto the balcony. Rain crashed down onto her hair and shoulders, mixing with the drying blood and breaking into scarlet rivulets across the marble.

There was nothing left on the table behind her now but dark, blurred stains. Amy followed her soundlessly. They stood side by side at the railing, their bodies lightly touching, watching the city shimmer behind the curtain of rain. Cold drops slid down their faces.

Lily brushed her fingers along Amy's cheek, then lower — over her neck, her chest. There wasn't only dominance in her touch — something gentler there too. Amy didn't pull away. On the contrary — she leaned closer, wrapped her arms around her.

"I liked him," Lily said, watching the lights below. "Stubborn fool. Sees enough, but understands nothing."

Amy allowed herself a small smile, trailing her finger across Lily's blood-smeared lips.

"Yes — he's not particularly bright," she agreed.

Their faces hovered a breath apart. The rain washed the blood from Lily's mouth and carried it down her chin onto Amy's shoulder.

"Everything is going well," Lily whispered. "For now."

The City flickered below, its streets pulsing with life — like veins on the body of a vast, unsuspecting prey that had no idea the hunt had already started.

Chapter 6. I'm Here

Mark reached the Old City around four. The noise was ebbing away: the bars had already flung their doors open, but people still preferred to stay home, avoiding the streets.

The car crawled through the alleys between the worn buildings. The dim walls were eaten through by moisture, mold darkening in the cracks here and there. His cuff chirped briefly — they had arrived.

Babylon hid in a narrow alley between two residential blocks. By the wall sat an overflowing trash container; on the wet tiles lay soggy cigarette butts and dark stains nobody wanted to identify. The door blended with the facade, revealed only by a flickering sign. Red neon blinked through the rain, splashing crimson across the puddles — more blinding than illuminating.

The bar looked exactly as Mark had imagined: half respectable by Ring standards and half a den. Inside, a dense, sticky smell hung in the air — tobacco mixed with a cloying sweetness. The music played low; the bass thudded dully through the floor and walls. The dim lights created an intimate, almost conspiratorial atmosphere.

Behind the counter worked a thin bartender equipped with old-model bionic arms — bare steel without synthetic skin. His movements were pure muscle memory: wipe a glass, mix a drink, take cash, repeat.

Unlike the City, where payments had long been handled through cuffs and patches, here they still used pre-war paper cash. Police were given small amounts of cash — for work in the Ring. Mark ordered a whiskey, carried it to an empty table, and scanned the room.

Tables lined the walls, leaving the center open — a space where, judging by the stains on the floor, fights broke out more often than dancing.

At the entrance sat three men in leather jackets — broad-shouldered, alert, their hands resting on their knees. By the counter stood two prosti-

tutes, dressed far too brightly for this place: cheap makeup, tired eyes. The rest of the patrons kept to the shadows, drinking in silence, barely paying attention to anyone. They all noticed Mark's arrival, but their interest faded quickly.

The only one who caught Mark's attention sat in the right corner. Around thirty, neatly dressed: a crisp collar, carefully combed hair. On the surface — an ordinary visitor, but Mark's instincts didn't usually fail him.

The man sat with perfect posture, hands folded neatly on his knees. People didn't sit like that in bars. He surveyed the room with cold, methodical precision — like someone waiting for a specific person to walk in. Even the way he drank was strange: precise, measured sips.

Mark watched him through the reflection in the polished metal counter. Nothing changed. The man didn't join conversations, didn't react to laughter or shouting, existing as if in a separate layer of reality, a little detached from the room around him. Men like that usually went for the girls, but he didn't even glance at them.

Outwardly — nothing unusual for a Ring local. No patch, no cuff. But his movements were precise to the millimeter, too exact for a normal human.

The door swung open, letting in icy air and the smell of wet asphalt. On the threshold appeared an unshaven man in greasy clothing, with the face of a lifelong alcoholic. His left arm was missing — the sleeve of his jacket hung empty.

The one in the corner raised his head a full second before the hinges creaked. He didn't even turn toward the sound. And he didn't even have a patch.

Borg, Mark thought. Fully rebuilt. Rumor had it the old services kept them in the shadows — the ones that survived the war but stayed outside any official structures on the surface.

Ordinary augs had a narrow strip of skull removed and replaced with a controller — a thin plate running along the temple. It gradually intertwined with their neurons, pushing them out until the organic dissolved into the synthetic. The controller maintained a link to the Contour, making a person part of it.

When the substitution reached thirty percent, the device was swapped: excess electronics removed, leaving a glowing line on the skin — the generation's scar.

Borgs were probably patched differently: not through gradual substitution, but through a crude, accelerated procedure. In a month or two, a brain could be replaced entirely. Maybe faster. No strip on the temple, no glowing scar.

The man lowered his gaze. The movement was too smooth, without hesitation — an economy of motion unnatural for a human being. The one-armed drunk by the door didn't interest him.

Partial augs still kept a personality. Most of the time. In Diana and the others, Mark only occasionally caught oddities: overly even intonations, shifts in behavior. Maybe he was nitpicking, seeing what wasn't there. But Mark had never met a borg and knew almost nothing about them. Some said that after the express-replacement the person stayed themselves — only faster, sharper, more focused. Others insisted that nothing human remained at all: just a shell, an empty vessel run by a server.

He wondered: if borgs had no neurons left at all, what happened to memory? Was it stored in the cloud? And what if the server crashed one day, or someone decided to copy your life into a stranger's head — and erase yours?

Mark was lucky — the reflection in the counter let him watch without being noticed. The borg sat motionless, his eyes fixed somewhere deep in the room, as if he'd powered down. He had to be careful. Even ordinary augs had altered perception: the patch suggested where to look, caught eyelid tremors, micro-movements, muscle tension.

And the man in the corner was far more than an aug.

Trying not to think about anything specific, Mark took a sip and checked whether the bartender was coming. On an old screen a typical City-Contour-generated program was playing: synth-actors, sterile emotions — everything so correct it looked alien here.

The borg continued his steady scan of the room. And then he slipped — his gaze lingered on the bar counter a fraction of a second longer than it should have.

He'd been spotted. No movement: not his head, not his body. Just a microsecond delay, and something flipped inside — like a target lock. Outwardly the borg remained detached, but there was a tight, focused tension inside that stillness.

Mark let his eyes drop, as if studying his glass. He rotated it by the rim, deliberately loosening his shoulders, shifting his posture, though inside everything had tightened.

The man didn't move. But Mark could feel he'd been marked — a quiet entry somewhere in an invisible ledger.

At that moment, the door swung open again, and a young woman around twenty-five walked in with the wet wind. Her black coat dragged street water behind her, bright pink strands plastered to her cheeks. She swept her gaze across the room — fast, registering faces. She lingered on Mark a second longer.

Great. I look like a cop.

The borg raised his head smoothly, with the unerring precision of a sensor. He stood, slid the chair back with care, and moved after the girl. No attempt at conversation, no hint of flirting — just following at a measured distance.

At the counter, she exchanged a few words with the bartender and headed toward the back rooms. The borg adjusted his step and kept going with the same precise rhythm.

Mark finished his whiskey, set the glass down, and pretended to check his cuff for messages. He waited. Gave them a minute, maybe two, before getting up and heading toward the place where the girl and her shadow had disappeared.

The corridor was narrow and dim, heavy with the smell of sweat and tobacco smoke. Faded numbers lined the doors along the walls. Behind one door, music thudded; from another seeped a man's bass and a woman's laughter. The sounds merged into a viscous hum of tired, hopeless lust.

At the end of the corridor, a door slammed — someone had slipped out through the back exit. A lock clicked. The last door remained slightly ajar.

Moving carefully, Mark nudged it with his fingertips and looked inside.

The room was cramped and miserable. A narrow bed with a greasy blanket, a battered nightstand, a sagging armchair by the wall — everything

old, stained, scavenged — the kind of furniture people in the Ring dragged out of abandoned apartments. On the nightstand: black candles and a deck of tarot cards, several scattered across the filthy floor.

And on the bed — a body. The same girl. The pink in her hair was still barely visible, though most of her head was gone. She'd chosen pink to look more alive, but death had outshone any color.

Position: on her back, arms spread to the sides. Visible injuries: extensive cranial trauma, presumably a large-caliber gunshot wound — he noted automatically, surprised that the bureaucratic phrasing from his past still lived in his mind. Protocols weren't needed anymore: wristbands and drones recorded and analyzed everything themselves.

The splatter on the wall indicated a point-blank shot. No signs of struggle: the furniture hadn't moved, and there wasn't a scratch on her hands. The girl hadn't expected an attack and hadn't resisted.

The body had been shot with surgical precision: rounds placed in the heart, liver, lungs. Each one calculated for maximum damage, no waste. The head had taken the worst: what remained was a mash of shattered skull and pink tufts.

Augs almost never miss. Borgs — even less so.

Mark shut his eyes, trying to steady himself, pulling the heavy, nauseating air into his lungs. In all his years on the force, he'd seen plenty of bodies, but what lay before him wasn't a murder. It was an execution.

What now? He wouldn't catch the borg, and protocol said this was a job for the strike units. The man hadn't been interested in Mark — only in the girl.

Carefully avoiding the sticky patches underfoot, he stepped into the room. Something still crunched beneath his boot. By the nightstand, among the scattered cards, lay a slim book. No title, matte-black cover.

Mark picked it up and flipped through it. The pages were covered in thin, feminine handwriting: Latin mixed with some unrecognizable characters. Between the lines — drawings: figures, geometric circles, diagrams of the human body with marked points. The pages bore traces of edits — the writer had rewritten and corrected her text many times.

Mark skimmed quickly, not reading, until a familiar symbol caught his eye. A circle — a half-cross — a serpent. No caption, no explanation. He hurriedly slipped the book into his pocket.

Now, according to protocol — no actions. Turn around and walk away. But this bar was the only lead left after last night. What if this murder was exactly why he'd been drawn here?

And Mark said aloud:

"Call the Center. Homicide at Babylon Bar."

"Received," the comm replied.

A few seconds passed.

"Confirmed."

A blatant violation of protocol. Direct contact with the Center was forbidden for rank-and-file officers. Such calls were logged automatically, and punishment was... inevitable. He might even get fired. But the words were already spoken, and there was no way back.

He leaned over the body and searched it. Nothing. No cuff, no documents. Mark was about to straighten up — when he caught movement in the corner of his eye. He froze.

Fingers. They seemed to twitch. Holding his breath, Mark stared — the hand lay still. Maybe he imagined it?

He shifted his gaze. Her head, which a second ago had been a shredded mass of blood and bone, was intact. Resting neatly on the pillow, framed by clean pink strands, looking straight at him. And then, right before his eyes, her face began to rot.

The skin turned gray, mottled with livid patches, swelling until it stretched to the breaking point. Then it split. A jagged tear crawled across her cheek, oozing black, oily pus. White maggots spilled from her eyes like rice.

Her jaw slowly, with a dry click, opened — jerking in unnatural spasms, like a broken doll's. And that decaying mask smiled at him.

"Mark," the decomposing lips whispered, and his blood froze at the sheer impossibility of it. The words came from everywhere at once, born directly inside his skull.

"I'm here."

Her cheek peeled away, exposing blackened bone, and one eye slid from the socket in a cloudy, iridescent jelly.

Unable to move or even breathe, Mark remained leaning over her. A primal, soundless terror drowned out everything else. All that was left was a heavy, icy knot in his gut and a distant, detached kind of curiosity.

"Mark Kane?"

The question yanked him out of the trance so abruptly he almost cried out. Ordinary, mundane words — completely foreign to the thick nightmare he'd been drowning in a moment ago. He turned. A plain, unremarkable man stood in the doorway. A Center employee.

"Checked everything here? I'm Barry."

Mark nodded, not immediately processing the meaning of the words. His brain was still trying to fuse the two realities together. He forced himself to look at the bed again.

The body lay exactly as it had in the first second after he entered. Decapitated, torn open, frozen in death. No rot. No maggots. No whispering, decomposing lips. The head — a bloody ruin. Nothing had changed.

Something was clearly wrong with him.

The cuff on his arm chirped, obligingly projecting information onto the holo: Barry Logan, detective, Center, access level one.

Mark took a step back and exhaled. What an idiot. This Barry, appearing out of nowhere; that borg in the bar who tagged him in a split second. Of course, they knew who Mark was. The damn cuff broadcast everything about him to anyone with the right clearance. He was basically a walking dossier on himself.

Chapter 7. Follow Me

They stepped back against the wall, giving the drone room to work. The device hovered, scanning every detail: the pool of blood, fragments of bone, scattered tarot cards, the spray on the wall. The ceiling lamp flickered, bathing the room in a sickly yellow light.

First came full photo and video capture, then the collection of DNA samples, fingerprint search, bullet trajectory analysis. All strictly by protocol, without human error or emotion. Now Mark could take a proper look at Barry.

Short, stocky, around forty — he looked more like a factory worker or a small-time vendor than a detective. If Mark had seen him on the street, he'd never have guessed this man outranked him.

Barry noticed the scrutiny and gave a slight, almost patronizing smile.

"The Center doesn't hire augs," he said slowly. "We work in the Ring. Most days, you can't even wear a cuff."

He lifted his arm, showing a worn band — not a fresh Center issue, but his own old one. A veteran, then, just like Mark.

"Out here, people won't talk to you if you've got a cuff on," Barry added. "Might even get you stabbed in an alley."

He chuckled briefly, as if he'd said something funny. The laugh was short and hollow — the kind you get when someone forgot how to laugh years ago.

Shifting his weight from foot to foot, Mark felt like he no longer belonged there. The case had passed into Center jurisdiction, and his role was over. The drone kept working methodically; Barry watched with professional calm. Mark had become a witness they'd soon send home, nothing more. He brushed off his coat and shoved his hands into his pockets.

"Am I free to go now?" he asked in a deliberately formal tone.

It came out sharper than he intended. Barry laughed again and looked at Mark with a kind of admiration — as if thinking, damn, look at this comedian here. For a second, it even seemed he respected the sarcasm. Then he realized Mark was serious. The smile vanished.

"Listen, kid," he said. "Why do you think I'm here alone, when protocol says there should be two of us?"

Seeing Mark's confusion, he addressed the cuff. "Show him his status, tin can."

Mark flinched: a stranger's voice had activated his cuff, as if that were perfectly normal. The cuff chirped and projected a holo with an ID:

Mark Kane, Detective. Center. Division C (the Ring).

The meaning didn't land at first. A mistake? Lily and BioTech? But how, if last night had been a dream? His thoughts tangled into a tight knot, one cutting off the next. Mark felt like a background extra in someone else's play: the drone worked, Barry stood beside him, and he — with a detective status he hadn't asked for — could only stand there and watch. There was no joy in it. Barry smirked and winked.

"What, jumped real high from regular police, huh? Must've had friends in high places."

He said it without malice, but with a hint that he already knew the answer, and what interested him wasn't what Mark would say, but how he'd squirm.

"Come on, don't pout, I get it," Barry added, and that made Mark's skin crawl even more. The tone soft, teasing — like an adult patting a child on the head. "By the way," Barry added, checking Mark's cuff, "the captain'll be here soon. That's a nice career step too, if you can grab her attention, huh?"

He winked again — calm, friendly — and Mark understood that one more second, and he'd snap.

But suddenly he saw Barry differently. The face that had seemed unremarkable a moment ago now looked heavy, greasy. Softness swelled under the skin, the cheeks sagged slightly, the lips looked a little too moist, the eyes gleamed with some internal self-satisfaction. The face of a glutton — someone who expected life to hand him everything on a platter. People like that were easy to manipulate — you only had to say the right words.

And then it vanished as suddenly as it appeared. The ordinary face, no softness, no shine. Just a cop. One of many. The anger drained, replaced by a cold certainty: it didn't matter how a person looked or what they said — only how they were put together inside.

Heels clicked in the corridor — sharp, confident steps. In the doorway appeared a woman around thirty in a formal Center uniform: a dark-blue jacket, polished belt with a holster, a captain's gold badge on her chest. Short black hair neatly styled, a dark visor — not sunglasses, but a tactical display with a faint shimmer.

She gave Mark a professional, uninterested glance and turned to Barry.

"What happened here? Another prostitute?"

"Yes, ma'am," he replied quickly. All his previous casual swagger evaporated, replaced by exaggerated respect. "Head blown off, then filled with rounds just to make sure."

With a small movement of her hand, she summoned the drone report, scanned the data hovering before her, and nodded — more to register the information than approve it. Then she stepped toward Mark.

"Eliza Dahmer," she introduced herself curtly. "You must be Detective Kane. Your transfer to my division was processed yesterday."

He recognized her the instant she walked in. He knew that black hair, that voice, those lips.

So — Eliza.

He shook her hand.

"Nice to have friends in BioTech, right, Barry?" she threw over her shoulder as she moved aside.

Barry let out a low whistle, almost under his breath:

"Well, damn... And here I thought it was through the Center."

He no longer allowed himself to get distracted — with a frown he fussed with the interface, manually running the drone's data through his old cuff. What an aug would have done in a second took him an eternity.

Only now did Mark notice the small green light on his own comm — a message marked private, which kept the holo from appearing. On the screen:

"Leave in one minute."

"I think I'll get some fresh air," Eliza said, giving the room a disgusted look. "Revolting."

"Of course, I'll handle everything," Barry assured her quickly, eyes glued to the holo.

She left the room. Mark counted a minute and followed. The corridor was empty, his steps echoing against the dirty walls. He walked toward the back exit — the same route the borg had taken an hour earlier.

In the narrow alley behind the bar, under a light rain, she was waiting. She kissed him and removed her visor.

"So you found what you were looking for, Mark?"

Her heterochromatic eyes pulled him in again, like a vortex. They walked together along the crooked alley. Stones slid underfoot, rain collecting in muddy pools.

"I don't understand what's happening," he said.

"You can't understand yet," she replied.

"Is this... another dream? Like before? Or a simulation? Some new kind of patching? Or—"

Eliza laughed. Her laugh was dry and distant, as if she weren't laughing at him at all, but at something she'd long known and already accepted as inevitable.

They walked across the cobblestones, and without Mark noticing, the clatter of stone underfoot shifted into the muted crunch of gravel. The alley dissolved and vanished. Around them stretched a dark, abandoned park where time itself had stopped.

Dead trees clawed at the sky with black branches, like upturned roots reaching into emptiness. The ground was brown, bare of even a blade of grass, greedily swallowing the rain without leaving puddles. The wind creaked through the dry limbs; rusty lamp posts jutted from the soil like broken bones.

The wood of the benches had long since rotted away, leaving only their cast-iron skeletons, but on the armrests faint ornaments were still visible — once elegant curls, now eaten through by rust. Mark took a closer look and made them out: serpents. Twisted, knotted together, their heads blurred by time.

Rain fell soundlessly on bare metal and dead branches. It seemed the serpents on the benches were listening to its rhythm, waiting for something. In the distance, through the fog, the outline of a bridge emerged.

"This is a dream," Mark declared firmly and kicked the iron frame of the bench.

The metal was real — sharp pain shot through his foot and up his leg. For a moment, he thought the serpent head on the armrest twitched and gave him a hateful look through its hollow eye sockets.

Eliza laughed — this time lightly, carelessly.

"No, Mark. This isn't a dream."

Anger boiled in his chest — at her, at this non-dream, at his own helplessness.

"Let's go to the bridge," she said, taking his hand. "It's an important place to me."

She took his hand, and at her touch the world blurred, melted, the gravel beneath them turning into wet cobblestones. They were standing by the bar again. The red neon trembled in the puddles.

"What's happening to you?" Eliza asked, and for the first time there was real concern in her voice. "You blacked out for a few minutes."

Mark looked around — and the world cracked again. On the bar's wall, where just a minute ago there had been nothing but wet plaster, now writhed the body of a giant serpent. A black shape coiled across the whole façade, the reptile's eye burning with a venomous green glow. He blinked, his heart dropping into his stomach — and then realized it was only graffiti — disturbingly lifelike. But still — the wall had been clean before.

"Stay with me tonight," Eliza said. "I live nearby, here in the Ring."

There was care in her voice, but beneath it lay something else — almost a plea.

"You're not well, Mark."

The pleading softened into quiet certainty — not a command, not a request, but the simple knowledge that he wasn't going to refuse. She stood so close he could feel the warmth of her breath. Red neon reflected in her eyes, and her pupils pulled him into a void where everything that had happened started to lose its shape.

Rain glistened as it slid down her dark hair and jacket. Eliza didn't seem to notice — she stood perfectly still. Mark drew a deep breath of the cool, wet air and nodded.

"Of course."

It was surrender — a step into something faceless, incomprehensible. At that moment, Mark understood: he was crossing another line, and he could no longer tell where the familiar world ended and where something entirely different began. Something without a name or boundaries.

Chapter 8. I Can Offer You Far More

He woke as if dying — slowly, with the sense that his body wasn't really his anymore. His head throbbed with a dull, rhythmic pain in his temples, and his tongue felt like a foreign, withered piece of flesh. Mark lay still, listening to the steady, indifferent murmur of the rain. His mind reluctantly gathered itself from the fragments of last night: Barry's greasy laugh, acrid smoke, the warmth of cheap liquor burning in his throat. The air here smelled exactly like it had on that first night — the one that turned into a vision. Ancient damp, stale dust, and that faint sweetness of decay soaked deep into the walls. Time itself had curdled and rotted in this room.

The room swayed when he sat up, a wave of dizziness washing over him. Gray, lifeless light oozed through the fogged windows, catching on familiar shapes of disorder: a dresser with peeling sides, the sagging seat of an old armchair, a cup with amber residue dried at the bottom. Eliza never cleaned here. Bare concrete floor. And in the midst of this desolation — a dimly glowing lamp. A luxury. An absurd anomaly for the Ring.

The mismatch scraped at him from inside, like a splinter he couldn't get out. The room, down to its last crack, was the same one from his fevered memory. Mark stood. Beyond the glass, washed by endless rain, lay the familiar landscape. Out there, beyond the Barrier, was the sterile, unreachable glow of the City. Here — the filthy districts of the Ring, the scars of ruined buildings, torrents of water devouring the streets.

A month ago, this place had been a hallucination, a waking fever dream. Now it was simply the room he woke up in. The impossible, forbidden memory had turned into routine — a shabby apartment in the Ring where he now shared a bed with Captain Eliza Dahmer. He walked across the room and touched the sheet — ice-cold. Eliza had left long before dawn, without leaving even a trace of warmth behind. Only emptiness.

A small light blinked insistently on his wrist.

"What is it?" Mark asked hoarsely.

"Incoming message from Eliza Dahmer," the cuff replied in its lifeless voice. "'Leaving for a couple of days.' End of message."

She left often—far too often. Disappeared without a trace, sometimes for a day, sometimes longer. "Work," she would throw over her shoulder whenever he asked, and that word became a shield every guess broke against. He had stopped asking. This place wasn't meant for him. It belonged entirely to her, like a second skin. Her presence clung to everything: the curve of the book spines on the shelf, the shine of the trinkets on the dresser. Everything here carried her imprint. And he was just another object in the collection, a temporary guest tolerated for a while. The apartment allowed him inside but breathed with a life not his own. And it watched.

He stepped into the bathroom and flipped the switch. A brief delay, then the flash of a dying bulb, the angry sputter of old wiring. The dull ceiling lamp flickered and reluctantly came on. The air met him with the smell of decay. Mold had eaten into the tile grout, rusty tears streaked the walls. A thin, dirty stream trickled from the showerhead. He stepped under it without expecting anything — no warmth, no clarity, nothing. He simply stood there, letting the cold water wash the remnants of the night from his skin. Her scent. Her touch. A rough towel, socks—yet the shirt was nowhere to be found. Not on the chair, not in the wardrobe. He was close to giving up, ready to throw the jacket over his bare torso, when something on the dresser caught his eye.

Amid the chaos of her things — scattered hairpins, a powder compact — lay a cuff. Old, its screen dead, but the glass perfectly intact.

His hand moved on its own, fingers closing around the worn metal. Light, feminine. A thin crack traced the rim like a strand of hair. Holding it felt wrong, as if he'd grabbed someone's secret with his bare hand. He'd glimpsed it here before, assuming it was Eliza's. But she would never have left without her cuff. Which meant it was someone else's.

His heart thudded, dull and heavy. Maybe it was evidence she'd taken home from the Center and forgotten. The drawer was slightly open. He pulled the handle, and it slid out silently. Inside lay a terrifying, deliberate order. Dozens of cuffs. A whole graveyard. Different models, all with dead

screens. Some were charred; one had a dark, crusted smear of dried blood. And beneath them—more. And more.

His fingers disobeyed him, picking one up, then another. On the inside—names, worn down to ghosts. "Lin..." "A. Ken..." And then he found a narrow one, a child's. A shiver ran through him.

His palms broke out in a cold sweat. He dropped into a crouch. The drawer stared back at him with its multitude of dead displays. The faintly sweet smell of old metal made him nauseous. Thirty cuffs, maybe more. Trophies.

Mark straightened abruptly, stepping back. He stood staring at the wall but saw nothing. The room's colors drained away. The thick, anxious scent of decay returned, as if seeping straight out of the drawer.

He shut it. Then opened it again—just to be certain. Not a hallucination.

He needed to understand what he was looking at. He grabbed three cuffs at random, tossed them onto the table, and connected them to the charging port. His hands worked automatically while his mind refused to accept what it saw.

They charged quickly, with a short, hungry click. The screens flared to life. The souls trapped inside seemed to wake at his touch. Identification. All three showed active status. A shudder ran through him, sharp as a jolt of electricity. The Contour always locked a cuff seventy-two hours after vital signs ceased. Always. Which meant someone had altered the protocol, leaving these devices alive.

"Center access. Scan," he said, his voice sounding muted and alien.

The cuff silently projected a holo in front of him.

[Karina Liu > 28 > Civil Service, Sector D] Status: unknown. Last signal: 2140-03-12.

[Haruka J. > 33 > Technician, BioTech] Status: unknown. Last signal: 2140-08-03.

[Reina S. > Age not listed > Account restricted] Status: unknown. Last signal: unknown.

Mark read the text with a strange, dull detachment. Dates. Names. The same verdict spelled out in white: unknown. None of them officially dead. They had vanished. And their cuffs—almost personalities—had lain

in Eliza's drawer like trophies. The cuff blinked patiently, awaiting further command.

"Access Karina Liu's logs."

His clearance at the Center sliced through the encryption like paper. A brief pause while the system weighed the request, then: confirmed.

"Last video. And vital signs," he ordered.

The holo flickered:

File REC>40028. Playing.

The image emerged out of digital darkness: a room barely visible through static. The camera struggled with the gloom, trying to lock focus, turning everything into blurred, spectral silhouettes. Smooth plastic walls. Somewhere off to the side, a dim lamp burned, casting long, distorted shadows.

Eliza's voice came through.

"I can offer you far more than you want, sweetheart."

Breathy, with a serpentine hint of seduction that made Mark's jaw clench.

The camera trembled.

Pulse: 110. Breathing elevated.

Karina's breathing.

A figure separated itself from the shadows. Nude. Female. A silhouette he knew better than his own.

Karina's quiet, stifled whisper — a question drowned in fear. And in response: Eliza's soft, intimate murmur of assent.

Pulse: 160.

A second of absolute silence. Then a lunge — chaos. A blurred motion, a white flash across the frame. The camera fell. The sound that followed wasn't a scream, but a short, strangled gasp, cut off by another heavy, muffled blow.

Pulse: 0. Respiration: 0. No vital signs.

The image tore apart, dissolving into static. The last frame caught the tiled floor, someone's shadow, a movement at the very edge.

But the audio remained — wet, rhythmic, methodical. Not a cry. Not a struggle. Just the noise of something happening beyond the frame, steady and final.

Signal lost.

And over it all came the even, emotionless voice of his own cuff, analyzing the log:

"End of recording. Wristband deactivation initiated by external cause. Analyze remaining logs?"

The sound still echoed in his ears as he stared blankly at the holo. He dragged a hand over his face — the skin felt cold and clammy. A deep breath didn't help. His skull buzzed, filled with the white noise of what he'd seen.

Tampering. A virus. A simulation. His mind, trained by years of service, clung to protocol, like a drowning man to a lifeline. Corrupted logs. Substitution. In the Ring — possible. But in the City... tampering with a wristband meant a death sentence. He could explain everything. Everything except the sound.

Wet, visceral, chewing through every mental barrier and settling deep inside his skull. Pulsing there — alive, repulsive.

The room felt too small. He stood and began pacing from corner to corner, trying to drown out the sound, the image. Too real. Too sharp. His thoughts darted from object to object, searching desperately for something solid to hold onto. The door. The dresser. A bottle. A heap of wrinkled clothes in the corner. Simple, ordinary things. Now they looked like props, painted illusions. The only reality was that sound. There had to be a rational explanation. There had to be.

The call came suddenly, like a lifeline thrown into the whirlpool of "window–door–window."

"Homicide," the cuff announced. "Priority level: three. Kane, Logan. Time: 9:11 a.m."

Protocol demanded simple, memorized actions. He bolted out into the street.

Barry, as always, was waiting at the office — he didn't have a car.

The Center's office in the Ring was a low concrete block squeezed between warehouses and empty garages. It had once been a police station, then a National Guard outpost, and now it housed Division C. A peeling sign reading "Storage" hung over the entrance. Not a soul around the building. Convenient.

The door was solid steel, no scanner. Mark knocked with his knuckles, short and precise. It took about ten seconds before he heard shuffling steps behind the door. A heavy bolt slid back, and the door cracked open just enough for a sleepy guard to peek through. He looked Mark over, recognized him, and stepped aside silently, letting him in.

The interior was a hybrid of a dispatch room and a morgue for obsolete equipment: tables rubbed down to bare metal, chairs with torn upholstery, and an unbeatable layer of dust. The air hung thick and bitter — a harsh mix of burnt coffee and the acrid smell of melting plastic from the eternally dying coffeemaker.

On one monitor, figures from some synth-show writhed in silence; on another, a sector map pulsed dimly. By the wall, two techs hunched like vultures over the guts of a terminal. A third, Tom, was locked in his eternal war with a cuff over blitz chess. On his holo, the king was once again in check. Tom moved a pawn with resignation. He always lost.

A side door creaked open and Barry stepped out, pulling on his jacket as he walked. Sleepy, disheveled. He spoke in the tone of a man for whom all calls had long blurred into one.

"Sector 4 again. Damn workers and their damn Pops," he muttered. "Stupid place. Locals say it's cursed. Satanists," he yawned, "coming out of their ears."

Barry didn't talk like a cop anymore — more like a broken record stuck on the same dreary song about hopelessness. Nothing new. Mark nodded silently. But inside, everything tightened — not because of the call or the sector. Because of the memory. Because of the sound.

"Losing again, Tom?" Barry sneered as he walked past.

"Go to hell," Tom muttered without looking up from the holo where his virtual king sat hopelessly cornered.

The two agents by the terminal exchanged quiet snickers. It was their daily ritual — watching Tom prove yet again that a human couldn't beat a machine. He always lost, but he stubbornly started a new game every time.

Outside, they were met by a thin, needling drizzle and a sky rubbed pale. Mark's car waited under a peeling awning. He opened the door, and the interior exhaled stale air and plastic. Barry dropped into the passenger seat with a heavy thud, sighing as if life itself were too much to carry.

The world beyond the windshield was a washed-out watercolor of gray. The rhythmic patter of rain. Everything as usual.

"You alright, partner?" Barry's voice cut through Mark's haze.

"Didn't sleep," Mark muttered.

"Ah." Barry grimaced knowingly, his greasy eyes flashing. "Your captain was pretty hammered last night. Drinks like... well, like a fish – or rather, like a captain."

He let out a deep, cavernous chuckle, pleased with his own joke.

"And where'd you lose your shirt, with your mistress?" Barry was in rare form today.

Mark zipped up his jacket and fixed his gaze on the window.

The car slid down the wet street. Concrete boxes drifted by — identical, peeling, blind. The world had lost focus, as though someone were erasing it with a blunt eraser. Mark stared straight ahead, but saw nothing except the interference buzzing through his own mind.

One thought kept circling in his head. The cuff. The sound. The final frame. And now Sector 4. Another murder. Another line in the corpse ledger.

He tried to feel something — fear, disgust, anything — but inside him grew only a ringing, glacial emptiness. And that emptiness frightened him more than any recording of someone else's death.

"Sector 4, West," the car announced, and Mark blinked, dragged back into reality.

He knew this district by taste and smell. The taste of machine oil on his teeth, the smell of rust and burned wiring. The asphalt had given up long ago, cracked apart, exposing soil soaked through with grease. Metal clanged somewhere in the distance — the sector's ceaseless soundtrack.

Between the skeletal remains of old factories and warehouses, shacks and huts clung to each other — ugly growths of rusted metal and broken concrete. Here they repaired what the City would have discarded without a second glance.

Even the mechanical hum couldn't drown out the sounds of life: shouts from the market rising into curses, followed by a short, indifferent crack of a gunshot.

This district survived on leftovers. On contraband. On the skill of turning trash into something functional. And on the Ravens gang, whose boss, Pops, maintained the fragile balance between anarchy and survival. The City didn't come here. Neither did rival gangs. For them, this place was a black hole on the map, valuable only for its wheezing generator.

The car sped past an abandoned factory. On the wall, drawn in charcoal over a faded corporate emblem, stretched a huge, skeletal raven. The bird dug its claws into the concrete; beneath it — a short, furious warning: "Pops will find you." The Ravens' marks were everywhere, like black sores on the walls.

The car hissed to a stop by the building — a three-story, pre-war eyesore, peeling and hunched as if under its own weight. The entrance exhaled dampness and the rancid smell of a shared kitchen. Cracks branched like lightning across the walls, mixed with the traces of other people's desperate lives: a tiny icon nailed to a doorframe, a prayer scratched into the paint with a knife, and just below it — a fat, furious curse word.

Behind the doors — silence. Dead, alert. The tenants had sunk into themselves, turned into pure listening, nothing else. Someone flickered past a peephole and vanished instantly. In the Ring, one law reigned: don't get involved. Not your business. Not worth your life.

Halfway down the second-floor corridor, a door stood open — a bright rectangle of emptiness leaking a smell into the hallway. First came the usual stench of mold, sweat, tobacco. Beneath it — a second layer, metallic, unmistakable.

The body on the floor lay broken, twisted at an unnatural angle, like a rag doll tossed by a petulant child. Nothing remained of the head — just a bloody mess of bone and tissue. On the wall behind it was a dark stain with ragged splash. As if someone's last thoughts had burst outward and frozen on the concrete.

"Well, he really spread his mind around," Barry tried to joke — then fell silent. It unsettled him, too.

Three more shots: chest, side, lung area. No frenzy. No panic. Not a brawl — an execution, just like at Babylon.

The mess in the room wasn't from a struggle for life, but from life itself — the kind lived in shadow and trash. Above the bed, scratched directly in-

to the concrete, was a crude goat's head — Baphomet. Nearby, in a puddle of hardened wax, lay a melted candle stump and an empty gin bottle.

It looked grotesque, yet oddly routine. A satanic "ritual" here was just another part of everyday life, like drinking or fighting.

Barry stepped up to the wall and poked the goat's head with the idle curiosity of a pathologist.

"You think he actually believed in this stuff?"

Mark shrugged. The protocol kicked in inside his head — routine, mechanical, soulless. Four shots. A neighbor heard them and called the police; the Center intercepted the call. Next step: canvassing.

Leaving Barry alone with the body and the drone, Mark stepped into the corridor. The single window on the landing didn't illuminate so much as deepen the shadows, making them thick and bottomless. The grimy walls gleamed with old grease.

The feeling came suddenly — that something was watching him. From cracks, from peepholes, straight from the shadows crawling along the walls.

And in that silence, where every step echoed like an intrusion, he heard a whisper. Soft, female:

"Mark."

Eliza's voice. So close, it felt like she was standing right behind him — and then it was gone.

His heart jerked. He spun around, staring into the darkness, seeing nothing. The corridor was empty. Only the weak light from the landing and the hollow quiet of the building.

Forcing down the sudden spike of fear, Mark began checking the apartments methodically. His first knock on a door covered with torn faux leather met with a coffin-like silence. Behind the second, someone coughed dully, took a couple of steps, and froze to listen. Mark waited. Nothing.

Before he could reach for the handle of the third door, something clicked inside. Not a lock — more like the dry snap of a deadbolt. The door opened a sliver.

A girl stood in the doorway. Seventeen, perhaps. Fragile, pale, almost transparent, with a tangle of pale hair falling over her face. Dressed for a different season: short shorts, a thin T-shirt. Against the ingrained filth of the corridor, her skin looked unnaturally, painfully clean, as if she'd just been

pulled out of some sterile cocoon. Thin lines curled along her arms and collarbones — fresh tattoos, more like scratches: interwoven runes, spirals, symbols Mark couldn't decipher.

But it wasn't the tattoos that struck him — it was her gaze. Calm. Attentive. Without the slightest trace of fear. As if she already knew who he was and why he had come. Like an acolyte greeting a priest.

"Hello," she said, her voice clear, steady.

She stepped back just enough to open the doorway and inclined her head slightly — a gesture completely out of place here.

"I'm Angela. I've only been here a couple of weeks."

Mark nodded silently, trying to make sense of the strange greeting. He had expected anything — fear, indifference — but not this ritual quiet.

"You're...?" she began, without finishing. A strange half-question.

"No, I'm not a cop," he said. In the Ring, people feared cops because of the shock troopers. "I'm with the Center. I'm questioning neighbors. There were shots last night — did you hear anything?"

She shook her head, pale hair shifting around her face.

"There are always noises here. Rain, footsteps in the hallway..." She paused. "Screams. Shots. You get used to it."

She spoke evenly, as if reciting from a manual. She looked at him for several seconds, then said the last thing he expected:

"Come in."

And again that slight tilt of the head. Not submissive — almost ritualistic, like a gesture of reverence.

Protocol said he should keep his distance from civilians. But something in her calmness, in that strange gesture, made him step across the threshold anyway. Curiosity? Or the sense that he was standing on the edge of something important, and this door was the only way in?

The room was an exact copy of the one where the body lay: the same washed-out gray, the same scraps of peeling furniture, the same stripped-down bedframe. Only here it didn't smell of death. The air was smoke-soaked, moldy, but lived-in. On the wall opposite, drawn in heavy black marker, was a perfectly straight inverted pentagram — not a faded old scrawl, but fresh, ink still heavy on the surface.

"Sit," she said, pointing to the bed.

Mark obeyed without thinking. And in the same instant, reality cracked.

The air halted, thickened, like water at great depth. Sounds — raindrops outside, his own breathing — stretched out, lost their edges, took on a resonant, cathedral-like echo. The room stopped being a room. It felt alive, pulsing, pressing in on him from every direction.

"Broken," Angela said, her voice flat, almost mechanical.

"Crushed," another voice repeated, but from somewhere behind his shoulder.

"Below," whispered a third — thin as spider silk — from inside his head.

It was no longer she who spoke, but a whole chorus — dozens of voices, male, female, childish, all braiding into one dreadful knot. They didn't sound; they vibrated directly inside his mind, each one brushing against his thoughts with an icy touch.

The words dripped into his consciousness like acid.

"Trampled," she said.

"Destroyed," he said.

"Taken," said the others.

"Forgotten," the rest whispered.

And from within the faceless terror — something personal, almost intimate:

"Mark, do not judge."

He opened his mouth to say something, to shout, and a word tore out by itself. Not his word. Someone else's.

"Chaos."

"Chaos," Angela answered — her voice closer, almost inside his ear.

"Chaos," echoed inside his skull — in his own voice.

"Chaos," she whispered, so close he could feel her breath.

"Chaos," he answered.

And then came the last one — spoken by the chorus, spoken by him, spoken by her:

"Kill them all."

Then silence descended. Not the absence of sound, but something dense and heavy, like a velvet shroud over the world. A silence that pressed on his eardrums and screamed louder than any voice.

Chapter 9. Do Not Judge

His consciousness surfaced with a jolt, as if someone had shoved him up from underwater. Bare walls loomed around him, cold concrete. Barry stood beside him. At their feet lay a body.

Nothing remained of her head — just a mash of bone, flesh, and hair smeared across the floor.

"Really lost her mind," Barry said, trying to joke, but he didn't laugh.

Another image flickered in Mark's memory — a dead man, that trip to the Western sector, the Ravens. But here it didn't smell of smoke and oil; it smelled of damp earth and chemicals. Outside the window stretched the deformed farms of Sector 17. The North.

On the wall behind the body was a brown splatter. It was as if this woman's final thoughts had burst outward — and just frozen there as a stain on the concrete.

Three precise shots to the torso. Heart, liver, lung. Anatomically exact — an execution, same as at Babylon.

Barry stepped to the wall and idly tapped the crude drawing above the bed — the goat's head of Baphomet.

"So," he said, "think she really believed in this stuff?"

He said it as if talking about the weather. Nothing in the room struck him as strange. For him, it was the first time; for Mark — it wasn't.

He stared at the symbol, at the posture of the body, at the spray on the wall — and his mind snagged under the weight of contradictions. He remembered another sector. Another victim. But Barry stood here, talking about a woman, and they were in the northern Ring.

Mark looked at the symbol, at the body, and nausea twisted his stomach. The details didn't match, but the ritual did. As if someone had taken a familiar scene and swapped out the actor: the same room, the same goat on the wall, the same execution — but a different victim. Which version was

real? The one in his memory? Or the one lying in front of him? The world watched a new cut of the film; he was the only one who remembered the old one.

They left the body to the drone. Barry muttered something about paperwork, about Sector 17 being a nest of bastards, and about how crossing the Major was a bad idea. He said the same about every gang. Mark barely listened. He nodded, mumbled something, but his mind was elsewhere.

At last, they were done.

They had to return to the office — sign forms, check in, leave Barry behind. But in his mind, that other room still lived, the one from a different reality. Wrong. Misaligned. When he finally broke free of the agents' empty chatter, he slid into the car.

"Route," he said, his voice hollow, and gave the address.

The car moved off without a sound. For it, this was just another address among millions, just a set of coordinates. For Mark — a pilgrimage back to the place where his world had fractured. A desperate attempt to prove he wasn't losing his mind.

The drive felt thick and slow, the headlights cutting through the rain, and with every meter the hum of the tires grew more intrusive.

Then he heard Eliza's voice behind his shoulder, clear as breath on his skin:

"Mark."

The seat was empty. Only raindrops crawling down the window.

"Mark," she whispered again — muffled, as if coming from the car itself, from deep within its frame.

The whisper seemed to vibrate under his skin. Mark shut his eyes tight, teeth clenched, trying to force the apparition out of his head. She isn't here. She isn't.

He inhaled deeply, opened his eyes, and fixed them on the road.

The factory, the Ravens' graffiti — everything as in the earlier version. The air outside once again stank of smoke and machine oil. The real reality, the one he remembered. The pressure in his chest eased a little.

His heart knocked dully against his ribs, marking each step as he climbed to the second floor. The building's owner briefly poked his acne-pocked face out of a tiny window, then vanished.

The first door was covered with torn faux leather. The second. The third — the one where he'd spoken with Angela.

He knocked. First softly, then harder, drumming his fist against the wood. Silence. He pressed on the handle — locked — and leaned his ear against the door, but there was no sound, no floorboard creak. He pushed harder, and the door gave way. The apartment was empty.

A low drone in his ears curdled into nausea, a bitter wave rising straight to his throat. This couldn't be. He had been here. The conversation, the pentagram, her strange reverent gaze...

Mark rushed downstairs and slammed the car door behind him. The cabin felt like a cramped, airless box of plastic.

"Call history for the last hour," he forced out.

The car immediately delivered its verdict on his memory.

"9:11 a.m. Call. Homicide. Priority level three. Sector 17, North."

He kept turning his cuff as if the device itself were to blame.

"No other calls?" he whispered. "Nothing for Westside? For the Ravens?"

The pause stretched too long, as if the car was trying to reconcile his insane request with the Circuit's logic.

"No. In the last twenty-four hours, the logs contain one call. Sector 17, North."

There had been no man, no Angela. The system was sure of it. Barry was sure. The whole world was sure. And he was left alone with his memory — of a reality that had never existed.

He sat in the car, listening to the rain drumming over the roof. What had happened?

First thought — he had finally snapped. Completely. He'd seen it plenty of times. Good cops, soldiers — at some point their minds just said "enough" and buckled. Showed them demons, made them hear whispers or crush invisible insects. Maybe it was his turn now. Twenty years in this filth. The war. The Ring. Sooner or later it had to happen.

He rubbed his temples. The theory was logical, but wrong. He'd once read that a madman never knows he's mad.

The smell of smoke and machine oil in Westside, the torn faux-leather on the door, the cracks in the wall. You don't invent things like that. A broken mind doesn't conjure details that specific.

It felt like... an old reel of film. As if someone had taken the record of his day, cut out a section — the call with the dead man, the encounter with Angela — and spliced in another. A new piece, with the woman and the North. And the old one was simply left on the floor, forgotten.

And everyone around him — Barry, the car, the City's system — played back the new, edited version only. He alone remembered what lived in the removed scene. But who could have done it? Who was the editor playing with his life?

That thought was worse than madness itself. Because if he wasn't insane, then someone existed who could, with a single flick of thought, change reality. Rewrite the past.

But how do you cut a strip of film straight out of a man's mind? And then a horrifying, vile idea flashed across his consciousness: a patch.

What if they'd implanted something in him? During the war, in the hospital? Or last night while he was drinking with Barry? A hidden neural chip that could erase and overwrite memory. Make him obedient. Controllable.

The thought grew, swelled into something grotesque. And what if they didn't implant anything at all? What if he'd always been like this?

Mark lifted his hand. Skin. Fingers. They felt fake. What if he was a borg? A flesh-puppet stuffed with synthetics and borrowed memories. His life, his service, his hatred for the City and the Ring — nothing but data scraped from a database. And now... now the program had glitched, and he'd seen something he was never meant to see — a cut piece of film.

Something boiled inside him — hot and black. Rage. If he was a machine, then he was a broken machine. And he would find whoever built it and tear the truth out of them — what was real, and what wasn't. He slammed his fist into the dashboard. He had to prove that at least something was real. Otherwise, he might as well step out of the car and walk into the path of a truck.

The drive home — to Eliza's apartment in the Ring — was short, too short. In the car, Mark let himself drift into a half-sleep. His mind thick-

ened, heavy, and he watched the vehicle glide forward. He stopped thinking about the cuffs in the drawer, about the two versions of the same death. He just needed to reach the place he, for reasons he couldn't explain, called home.

The streets grew narrower and darker; the rare streetlights caught strips of wet, cracked concrete and the rusty bones of rebar jutting from the walls. In the rearview display, a black, empty street stretched behind him.

The car turned into the final alley before the building. The wheels sloshed through a wide puddle coated in an oily film. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught the ripple — and the drowsiness vanished at once.

For a fraction of a second, in the rainbow sheen of the puddle, a reflection flickered. Not of streetlights or walls, but of two predatory pinpoints of light.

A white van.

He snapped around — nothing. The street behind was utterly empty, silent. Not a sound. His heart stumbled, stopped for a beat, then struck again — heavy, hollow. A slight shift, a hairline crack in reality, showing what was hidden beneath. The reflection in the water hadn't shown what was, but what might be there.

Long ago, they had taught him how to spot a tail by the double appearance of a car, by illogical turns. But how do you notice someone who isn't there at all?

That tail was as flawless as the borg's movements back in the bar. It didn't hide in alleys. Most likely, it was right behind him — invisible to any normal eye. And only the fracture in the world had let Mark notice it at all.

Cold shot through him — a sharp, sobering stab of reality straight into the heart of paranoia. He wasn't losing his mind. Someone was hunting him.

The car stopped by the entrance. For several seconds, Mark sat still, listening to the rain and the pounding in his chest. He didn't turn around. He knew: if he looked back, there would be nothing there. But he felt eyes on him — an alien, inhuman presence grazing the back of his skull.

He stepped out of the car, and the rain immediately clawed at his hair and clothes. Every step toward the entrance felt heavy, a little too deliber-

ate. He didn't look over his shoulder, but he felt the emptiness behind him — a void more frightening than any pursuer. A void that watched him.

The apartment greeted him with half-darkness and its familiar smell. He locked the door behind him, slid the heavy bolt into place — a useless ritual. If a borg was after him, no door would stop it. If his own mind was the one hunting him, a door would help even less.

Leaning back against the door, he stayed there in the dark. His breathing was rough. A borg. Surveillance. He went over the things he could still call facts. The reflection in the puddle. That foreign gaze. It had been real.

But what if it wasn't? What if it was just a glare, a trick of light on oily water? And everything else — just nerves?

He moved across the room and sat on the unmade bed. The streetlights pushed back only a thin layer of the gloom. Everything was where it belonged. Too ordinary for a world where invisible killers were hunting him.

Maybe this is what madness really looks like — not screaming, not foam on the lips, but a quiet, suffocating certainty about things that don't exist at all. The unshakable conviction that a reflection in a puddle is more real than the pavement under your feet. Mark checked the cuff: pulse normal. Blood pressure normal. The system registered no panic, no stress response, nothing unusual. According to it, absolutely everything was fine. Perhaps, he thought, the system knew better than he did.

"Cuff," he said, his voice hoarse.

"I'm listening, Mark," it answered immediately.

"Tell me about paranoia."

There was a pause — tiny, almost courteous, as if the device weighed how honest it should be.

"Of course, Mark. In simplified terms, paranoia is a state in which a person becomes convinced that someone or something intends them harm. Ordinary events may appear meaningful, glances or coincidences may seem threatening. Distrust becomes pervasive. In certain cases, the brain may generate auditory or visual hallucinations."

Each calm, helpful word landed like a clean incision straight into his thoughts, cutting through whatever was left of certainty. A psychiatrist? No — a psychiatrist meant BioTech, and BioTech had one answer to every-

thing: a patch. A patch that would rewrite neural pathways, reset the mind, polish it until it gleamed. No, he wasn't letting anyone do that to him.

He pulled off his jacket, and his fingers brushed something hard inside the pocket — the book he had taken from Babylon. He had almost forgotten it existed. The cover was warped, swollen from moisture. Using the cuff, he forced the thing to speak, to unfold its contents. The translation streamed out in jagged, feverish fragments: "...spill the blood upon Ishet and call the Whore...", "...Zazas, Zazas, Nasatanada Zazas...", "...the torch-bearing goddess led the Nameless One...". A collection of rites, scraps of delirium, a mixture of alchemy, invocation, and rot. And beneath the familiar sigil — the half-cross entwined with the serpent — there was nothing. Not a single word.

At the very end, on the inside of the cover, something had been carved by hand, the letters crooked and desperate:

The Book of the Nameless.
There is no truth, only the border of sleep.
Your number is eighteen.
Candle, wormwood, and lavender — light only one.
The truth of your will is a lie.
The truth of your lie is will.
Fire devours itself to burn brighter.
Numbers are a lie.
Follow her.

He sat there staring at those lines, the words sinking through him like cold rain through cracked concrete, and didn't notice the moment when reality thinned and softened, giving way to the heavy, bottomless pool of sleep.

Morning seeped into the room with the same gray, bloodless dawn as always. He rose with a pounding skull and the sour aftertaste of last night's fear on his tongue. The other side of the bed was cold — Eliza had not returned. He didn't even flinch at that. It had become the rule, not the exception.

Protocol demanded he report to the office. The only ritual that still made sense in this fractured world.

The rain had stopped, but the air hung thick and wet, as if sagging under its own weight. The street was empty: no people, no cars, no sound. For a moment, he almost believed that everything that had happened yesterday had been some elaborate fever dream.

He had already reached his car when a sharp pinprick pierced the back of his hand. A thin dart protruded from his skin, its dark plastic flights trembling slightly.

Warmth surged through his veins — heavy, syrupy, immediate. His knees gave way. The world tilted, blurred, shuddered like a malfunctioning holo, the edges dissolving into nothing.

Two figures glided out of the shadow of a nearby building. Black jumpsuits, sealed helmets — faceless, efficient, inevitable. They caught him under the arms without a word and dragged him toward the open doors of a white van.

The last thing he saw was the indifferent sky of the Ring — gray, hollow, uncaring. Then the darkness closed in completely and swallowed him whole.

Chapter 10. Absolute Truth

The sound returned first —a steady, low hum, like the breath of some colossal ventilation system. Then came the light: blinding, milky-white, radiating from everywhere and nowhere at once.

Mark was lying on something soft and cool. His palm — the one the dart had pierced — throbbed with a dull, localized ache. He tried to sit up, and the room tilted under him.

It was entirely white. Walls, floor, ceiling — fused into one seamless surface without corners or shadows, as if he'd woken inside a giant billiard ball.

A section of the opposite wall rippled, then slid aside noiselessly, revealing an opening.

The person who entered wore a plain gray jumpsuit with no insignia. Instead of a face — a shimmering field of distortion, a virt-mask flickering like interference on an old monitor. A constantly shifting, hypnotic pattern of light and shadow. Above where the hair should have been, the air itself rippled slightly, a trembling digital halo.

When he spoke, a symbol appeared on the mask — two horizontal lines, the sign of neutrality.

"Citizen Kane," the voice said, even and filtered, stripped of anything human. "My name is Michael."

For a brief moment, a stylized smile flashed across the mask — then vanished without a trace.

Mark managed to sit on the edge of the platform. His numbed muscles resisted, but his mind was already working. He forced himself to ignore the blinding whiteness of the room and the shifting static where a face should have been. He was a cop — and this was an interrogation. Or something close to it.

"What's going on?" Mark's voice came out steadier than he expected. "Am I under arrest? On what charge?"

Two question marks blinked on Michael's virt-mask — pure mechanical puzzlement. Then they melted away, replaced by a simplified icon of the scales of justice.

"*Arrest* is a term from the protocols of your former occupation, citizen," the filtered voice replied. "It implies crime and punishment. We have neither here."

The scales on the mask tilted once, then vanished.

"Consider this a quarantine. We detected an anomaly and had to make sure you weren't its source." For a moment, the scales reappeared — one pan slightly lower — and Michael paused. "Although we already know you are not."

Mark felt the trap under every smooth syllable of that voice. First — a veiled threat. Then — an abrupt absolution. A classic maneuver to fog a mind and make a man talk.

But through that manipulation glowed the single, deafening truth: they knew. They knew about the anomaly — about these fractures in reality. Meaning, he wasn't losing his mind.

"If you already know it wasn't me," Mark said, "then why am I here?"

The schematic smile surfaced again on Michael's mask — the same artificial expression as before, but now carrying a hint of approval.

"A good question, Mark. We need your assistance."

He extended a hand in a gesture of greeting; it was hollow, ceremonial — like the smile.

"If you need my help," Mark said, ignoring the holographic courtesy, "then explain what's happening. What the hell are these anomalies?"

"'Anomaly' is our internal term for the energy spike the Contour recorded yesterday in the Ring," Michael explained. "A technical nuance you need not concern yourself with. We are not interested in the event — only in the people. Those who were at the epicenter."

A new shimmer pulsed across the mask, and an image unfolded:

Eliza's photograph — the official one from the police database. Cold, clean, bureaucratic. The neat civilian caption beneath it: Eliza Dahmer.

"We've been observing Miss Dahmer for some time," Michael continued. "Your close contact with her turned out to be a fortunate coincidence. That's why you're here. We want to ask you a few questions about her."

So it wasn't an interrogation. It was recruitment.

"I don't know anything," Mark said, his voice flat.

Michael's schematic smile flickered again — almost sympathetic.

"You're telling the absolute truth. You really don't know anything."

He made a slight motion with his hand, and from the seamless white floor, an armchair rose without a sound — ergonomic, grown from the same blank material as the room itself. It stopped a few meters from the wall.

"Sit," Michael said. "What you're about to see is best viewed seated."

Mark hesitated only a second, then walked over and lowered himself into the chair. The material softened beneath him, molding itself perfectly to the shape of his body.

The moment he settled, the wall opposite dimmed, turning into a screen from edge to edge. The room fell into a soft half-darkness; only Michael's shifting mask continued to shimmer with that strange, liquid static.

"You insist you know nothing about Eliza Dahmer," the voice now flowed from speakers hidden in the walls, surrounding Mark, sinking into him. "Let's see if I can help you learn a little more."

The screen flared awake.

Not a hologram — flat video, filmed from above. A sleek, expensive car rolled up to a restaurant, its neon blurred by rain. The camera zoomed in. Eliza stepped out. She was wearing an elegant evening dress — something she would never wear in the Ring. She was smiling. Beside her stood a young man in a flawlessly tailored suit. He laughed, leaned in, whispered something into her ear. Like everything in the City, he looked flawless, almost like a synthetic model. Then he took her hand, and together they walked into the building.

"That is Lucas Lanier," Michael said. "Heir to the Lanier empire — the one everyone assumes really runs it. In reality, he's nothing but Lily Thorne's marionette." He paused. "These clips come from Contour monitoring drones. They're used to track subjects of special interest. We have all the recordings — and soon you'll have full access."

The feed shifted. Eliza and Lucas rode up in the elevator of a corporate-sector high-rise. Another cut — morning, a hotel corridor. The door swung

open: Eliza stepped out, rumpled, stripped of her usual professional composure. Her expression carried the shadow of pleasure and the raw, drowsy fatigue that comes after a long night.

For a fraction of a second, her still frame — taken precisely at that moment — flickered on the screen, then vanished.

"My apologies for the rather... intimate material," Michael said, a thin note of mockery sliding under his tone.

Mark's breath caught in his throat. Not jealousy — a sickening sense of having been played. That night on the rooftop, which he had clung to as something real, was nothing but one more of her roles. A prophetess of chaos for a worn-out cop, a glittering socialite for a wealthy heir. Different masks for different games.

The image shifted again. The video trembled — the drone tailing Eliza. She walked through a narrow street in the Ring with a girl of about twenty beside her. The girl was crying, whispering something into Eliza's ear. They entered a half-ruined building whose signage hung on rust-eaten chains. The drone slipped in after them.

Half-light. Concrete walls. Flickering strips of industrial lamps. Eliza and the girl stood in the center of an empty hall. The girl asked something — soft, hesitant — leaning closer. The next moment the movement changed — sharp, predatory.

Steel flashed. Eliza drove the blade into the girl's chest and twisted it, as if winding up a mechanical clock. The camera closed in. The victim's face was twisted in a silent scream. Eliza turned toward the drone, and in that split second the image tore apart with static, the connection collapsing into white noise.

"My apologies once again," Michael said somewhere to Mark's left. "Though for someone in your line of work, I doubt this is anything new."

The video shifted for the third time. The Ring again — an abandoned warehouse, half-dark, dust hanging in the air like ash. A man sat at a table, his face disfigured and inked over with crude tattoos. One of the local bosses. She stood beside him.

"Narcotics aren't my field," Eliza said. Her voice carried clearly despite the distance. "But as a gesture of goodwill... I think we can at least try."

She smiled — a smile that was not human.

Then the screen filled with cascading strings of numbers. Bank accounts. Millions, billions. Figures Mark couldn't even process.

"These are anonymous pools linked to Miss Dahmer," Michael commented. "Funds cycling every twelve hours to avoid tracing. We've tracked over a billion credits so far."

He paused, and a map of the Ring appeared. A red point pulsed in a familiar place — the very heart of the Old City. It expanded outward until it swallowed the entire district. 'Epicenter,' read the caption.

"The latest recorded anomaly," Michael explained. "It occurred while she was in the Ring."

The world tightened around Mark's skull like a band of iron, pulsing with each heartbeat. While he believed she was out of town — she had been in the Ring. Lying to him. Looking him in the eyes. "As you can see, Mark," Michael said, and his words fell like a sentence, "we already know quite a lot."

"What... what do you want from me?" Mark's voice came out hoarse and hollow, as if spoken by an empty shell of a man.

The schematic smile returned to Michael's virt-mask — blank and artificial, like the white room surrounding them.

"We want you to help us," he said. His tone carried neither pleading nor command — only calm, measured certainty. "We have drones. They recorded the anomaly and the epicenter. But both in the City and in the Ring, there are places where signal drops or is deliberately jammed. BioTech facilities, for example. Which is why we need something more reliable. Access to her surroundings, her contacts, her conversations."

He gave a barely perceptible nod, and a holo materialized in the air: a miniature device the size of a gnat, with fine filament legs and an almost invisible antenna. It looked like a tiny spider forged from silver and glass.

"Attach this to her skin. Completely painless. The microcrawler will record conversations and track the specific energy signatures of the anomaly." He paused, choosing his words carefully. "It will allow us to pinpoint her location if she decides to make any... let us say, unsanctioned moves."

Mark understood exactly what that meant — betrayal. He was meant to betray the woman who had opened his eyes to...

But the screen had shown her true face. A killer. A trafficker. And he — nothing but another object in her private collection.

"Why don't you just access her cuff?" he finally asked.

"A very reasonable question," Michael replied. "But in the Ring she doesn't wear a wristband at all, and in the City she uses borrowed ones. Which is, of course, a serious crime. But she herself isn't our only concern. We need her connections — and her information on the anomaly."

Other people's cuffs. Maybe he would've become just another one in her drawer. Something inside him cracked beyond repair, split clean through, and a part of Mark watched the whole scene from the outside — detached, emptied out, indifferent to everything.

The perfect City, sterile and immaculate, was dead. The living, chaotic Ring devoured itself. And she... she was worse than both of them.

He spoke now with the same detachment as Michael. His gesture — mechanical, like the borg's in the bar.

"I agree."

Michael nodded approvingly, reached into the pocket of his uniform and produced a small metal object the size of a coin, handing it to Mark.

"Just press it lightly to her skin. The coating will dissolve on its own."

Mark took it without even looking. A token of foreign power, accepted willingly.

"We're pleased to work with you, Mark. It's mutually beneficial," Michael said. His voice sounded cold, like the music of the spheres. "It will allow you to keep your sanity and, more importantly, your life."

"And you... who exactly are you?" Mark rasped.

"We call ourselves the Agency. You can use that name. Or invent another one," Michael replied, not a trace of emotion in his voice.

"And what happens next?"

"When this is over, we can offer you a position in the Center. Our protection will be enough. You'll be able to start over, right in the City. If you want to — even with your former partner, Diana. She's a detective now."

His words barely reached Mark's mind. He was thinking of something else. Of the girl on the rooftop, of her words: "Kill them all." And the truth was — now he was ready to kill.

Michael's voice shifted.

"Don't think of this as betrayal, Mark. Think of it as redemption — as a kind of deliverance." His tone softened, intimate. "You don't want to remain a puppet, do you? You want your job back, maybe even climb higher?"

Mark nodded. He wasn't sure to whom he was nodding — to Michael or to his broken memory.

"Excellent." The cold efficiency and control returned to Michael's voice. "We'll take you home. Act as though nothing happened. Your task is to plant the device. Good luck."

The wall rippled again and slid aside, and Michael vanished. Two figures in black coveralls entered. They lifted Mark without a word, carrying him like a limp sack of meat. For a moment, he thought their masks were staring at him with a multitude of open, unblinking eyes.

A couple of hours later, they just dumped him out of the white van. He stood on wet asphalt under the fine, sticky, endless rain. Back where everything had begun — in the Ring.

He returned to the apartment. The door closed, and he stayed in the dark, listening to the throb of his own heart. He walked into the room. Dimness reigned inside, barely pushed back by the streetlights.

And he saw her.

Eliza stood with her back to him, a dark silhouette against the window. Her figure — so familiar — seemed at once intimate and alien. She turned with a glass in her hand, took a sip, her gaze — two different eyes — sliding over his features like a scanner.

"Where have you been, Mark?" Her voice carried neither curiosity nor surprise. "You look awful."

Mark stepped forward, feeling the tiny tracker tug against the fabric of his pocket. He had to get close to her, take her hand, complete the task while he still had the chance.

"I... I was on a call," Mark managed. "I want to talk, Eliza. Now."

She took another sip. Her eyes were mirrored surfaces in which he couldn't find himself. She watched him in silence, and Mark felt the tension coiling tighter and tighter.

"You weren't on a call," she said at last. "And you don't want to talk. You're afraid."

Her calm, detached tone sounded so much like Michael's that a chill crawled over Mark's skin. Part of his mind stayed in the room; another fell straight into the void. She knows, whispered the indifferent voice inside him.

"I want to," Mark insisted. "I want to talk about... us."

The words sounded absurd, helpless.

Eliza set the glass on the dresser. The faint clink of glass on wood struck him as almost deafening in the stillness.

"Now?" She glanced briefly at her cuff — she must have put it on before leaving. "I have things to do today, Mark. I need to leave. I'll be back tomorrow. Your conversation can wait, can't it?"

She moved toward the door, and Mark reached out as though to hold her. This was his chance. Eliza paused.

"You're so nervous today," she said softly, almost gently.

Something else flickered in her eyes — something she usually kept buried: a shadow of sorrow. It stabbed through Mark with painful clarity, but he forced it down.

Without hesitating any longer, he stepped toward her. He had to act right now.

"Eliza, please," he breathed, his voice dry and hushed. "Stay."

Her shoulders lowered just a fraction, and Mark sensed it: she was torn not only because of him, but because of her own feelings.

"Not now, Mark. Not today," she said tiredly.

So he simply pulled her into an embrace and kissed her. He felt no warmth — only the cold burn of the tracker's casing in his palm. He didn't even notice the moment it slipped into her skin. Now she was stitched into someone else's design

Eliza didn't return the embrace. She waited until he let go — without a word, without surprise. Only sorrow.

"Happy?" she said, a faint smile touching her lips. "See you."

The door clicked shut behind her.

He stood in the middle of the room, his breath heavy, as if the air had been drained from his lungs. Outside, the rain had stopped, and its absence roared in his ears. He stared at the closed door.

He had done it. Betrayed her.

Now there was nothing left but to wait.

Intermission 2. Michael

Gabe's thoughts entered Michael's mind in a single instant — silent, compressed. Zero latency, almost. Not words, but pure information, folded into a tight packet.

> Signal stable. The sensors are tracking movement and recording audio.

Michael replied the same way — a blunt impulse, lacking even the pretense of subtlety.

> Energy signatures?

> Present. They don't match any known model, none of the known ones. A unique pattern. Great Rift signature. The packet carried an echo of dry satisfaction. The entity is unstable, shifting like a living organism.

Michael processed the stream. A good result. He felt no joy—just professional interest.

> The agent?

> Operational, yes. Didn't expect such willingness to cooperate. It's driven by guilt.

> Guilt is a lever, Michael thought, the echo following. Until it breaks.

> It won't break, Gabe replied instantly. It will follow orders. For now.

> The source?

> Identified. The data signature matches. This is the anomaly. She is the key.

> Then she's exactly what we need. But this is only the beginning.

> And after? Gabe asked. The anomaly is my interest. What's your plan?

> The connection between Eliza Dahmer and Lily Thorne. Dahmer knows Lanier and has ties to BioTech. If we confirm it, Lily gets compromised and removed from her chair.

> And then the Committee hands BioTech over to our control, Gabe added.

> Precisely. Her link to Dahmer is our opportunity.

The connection severed. The entire exchange — less than a second.

Chapter 11. A Stone Cast into the Water

Morning woke Mark with the familiar tapping of rain — the same old tapping, again. Sleep hadn't brought relief — only a plunge into emptiness, from which he surfaced with the same heavy head.

Traitor.

The apartment was silent. Too silent. He was sure Eliza wasn't here — until the dimness settled, and there she was. He hadn't sensed her presence at all; she sat there like a ghost rather than a living person.

She sat curled in the old chair by the window — a dark shape cut out against the wet, sulking sky. Seeing her in his T-shirt twisted something in him — too intimate, and somehow wrong. She watched the streams of water sliding down the glass as if nothing had happened, as if there had been no tense silence, no clumsy excuses the night before.

"You're here," he rasped.

She turned her head.

"Where else would I be?"

His throat tightened, a sudden pull from nowhere. The silence felt heavier — the kind where he couldn't ignore what he'd put inside her. Alien. Hostile. A mechanical insect embodying his betrayal. She behaved as if nothing had happened. And that, more than anything, terrified him.

Eliza set the cup aside. The quiet tap of porcelain on wood echoed in the room like the click of a chambering slide.

"You wanted to talk," she noted.

She hadn't asked a single direct question, and yet she'd already broken him open. An interrogation that ended before it even began. Yesterday's lie — desperate, flimsy — had already turned into a death sentence today.

"Yes. I did," Mark forced out. "About us."

The words sounded pitiful even to him. He tried, with frantic futility, to remember what exactly he'd said the night before — but only noise re-

mained in his head, and the weight of the bug in his palm. Now it was awake, alive, transmitting every beat of her heart to the Agency.

Eliza rose from the chair but didn't come closer. She stayed by the window — a black silhouette against the washed-out sky.

"About us?" she echoed with a faint, amused curl of her lips. "There is no 'us' in the Ring, Mark. There's you. There's me. And there are temporary alliances. You know that better than anyone. So, what did you really want to talk about?"

Her words hung in the air — stinging, poisonous, like a serpent's bite. They hollowed out everything that had been between them, stripping it down to a transaction.

"Temporary alliances?" Mark repeated bitterly. "Was that a 'temporary alliance,' back on the rooftop? When you talked about the City? When you brought me here?"

He stepped toward her, trying to break the ringing emptiness between them. Every word of hers burned through him like acid.

"You chose me. You saw something in me and pulled me into this. So don't talk to me about 'temporary alliances.' I want to know what's happening and what part I'm meant to play in it."

She watched him — weighing every word, every flicker of emotion, reading him down to the pulse. He held her gaze, though something knotted inside him, sharp as a blow.

"You want to know what role you play?" she repeated at last, her voice quiet. She stepped toward him in return, closing the distance to almost nothing. "You're a stone cast into the water, Mark. And I want to see what kind of ripples you make. That's all."

A stone.

Not a partner, not a player — just an object. Something thrown, something watched, something expected to ripple. She struck him cleanly, precisely, and without mercy. Answered none of his questions yet said just enough to shut him up.

She stepped away from the window and moved toward the coat stand where her uniform hung.

"Enough introspection for today, detective," she said in the crisp, professional tone she used at crime scenes. "We have work."

The next ten minutes passed in charged silence. They moved around the cramped apartment like two shadows whose paths were never meant to cross. Mark pulled on his jacket, checked his holster without thinking. Stole a glance at her — at the way she straightened the gold captain's badge, how her fingers brushed her cuff.

Someone else's cuff. Someone else's memories.

"Let's go," she called over her shoulder as she opened the door.

Her private interrogation was over. The workday began.

The ride to the office was suffocatingly quiet. Eliza stared out the window at the rain-blurred streets. Mark stared straight ahead but saw nothing except Michael's mask. Every word she had said today rang like a lie. Every pause like an accusation.

Nothing had changed at the Center. The same burnt-coffee smell. The same Tom locked in hopeless battle against the grandmaster cuff. Barry waited at the main terminal. Crime-scene photos flashed on the dusty screen: the woman from Sector 17, the girl with pink hair, and others.

"Well, that's it," Barry announced, nodding at the display. "Puzzle solved."

"The cuff assembled it," Tom muttered without looking up from his chessboard.

Barry jabbed a finger at the terminal.

"All four of the last stiffs had one thing in common — besides the whole occult-homicide freak show. Each apartment had an address written down. Same bookstore.

Same place in the Old City."

"The drone found it," Tom corrected again — savoring the moment, getting even with Barry in the pettiest, most satisfying way.

Eliza stepped closer to the screen, her face an unreadable mask. Mark stood just behind her, tracking every small shift in her posture, hunting for something—anything—in the tight set of her shoulders, the way her head tilted a fraction to the side. She was dissecting the situation piece by piece, cold and exact.

"I stopped by that shop yesterday," Barry announced, puffing up a little. He shot a triumphant glance at Tom — suck it, I'm the detective here. "And I pulled a couple addresses. Buyers from the last week."

Tom snorted but stayed silent.

"No clue why they take customers' addresses," Barry went on. "Maybe 'cause the books cost a fortune. So they can come collect 'em if the buyer croaks."

Eliza ignored the chatter, eyes scanning the list of addresses. Mark stayed just behind her, sensing that stillness in her — something coiled, calculating. She wasn't just reading; she was mapping the logic of the murders.

"A bookstore is too obvious," she said at last. "The killer wouldn't leave a trail that simple. Coincidence. What about the buyers? How many?"

She turned toward Barry.

"Three," he replied instantly, grateful that she appreciated his work, not Tom's sniping. "Two in our sector, one at the edge of the Workers' district."

"Good." Eliza nodded, and for an instant her gaze brushed Mark's — a brief, piercing flicker. "We'll split up. Barry, you take the first address. Mark and I will take the second. Tom goes to the third."

She spoke like a captain — crisp, commanding, nothing out of place. But Mark heard the shadow underneath.

We'll split up.

She wanted him alone. No witnesses. No buffer.

His stomach twisted into a cold, tight knot. Fear of consequence, fear of the reckoning he knew he deserved — and the shame of knowing he feared her.

"Yes, captain," Barry answered brightly, pulling up the map on his holo.

"Then let's move," Eliza said, already heading for the door, not even checking whether Mark followed.

"And Barry — you'll have to get there on your own."

The rain had started again, pattering softly on the car roof, each cold drop amplifying the oppressive silence inside the cabin. Eliza had turned toward the window.

Every inch of space between them vibrated with unspoken questions and lies. He had to say *something*. Something normal — something an ordinary cop would say on an ordinary assignment.

"So, where are we headed?" Mark asked, his voice surprisingly steady. "What's the address?"

Eliza didn't answer. She lazily ran a finger across the dashboard. A holo flickered to life in front of him, displaying a dossier.

Name: Silas "Mute"

Occupation: dream cartographer

Status: Informant (former)

Notes: Creates dream maps for clients using a mix of homemade psychotropics and meditative techniques. Claims he can find "lost things" and "hidden paths" inside other people's dreams. Provided information to the Center in the past. Contact lost three months ago.

He'd heard of many strange professions in the Ring, but this... this was too close to the madness he was already slipping into.

"Dream cartographer?" he echoed. "What the hell would a killer want with him?"

Eliza shrugged, offering no answer.

The car rolled to a stop in a narrow, dim alleyway, its engine falling silent. Down the street, behind a veil of rain, stood Silas's house. Just like all the others — old, shabby, its windows dark, hollow sockets, nothing remotely remarkable. The standard pre-war ruin. A single window on the second floor glowed faintly — the occupant was home.

Silence pressed harder than the hum of any generator. Outside, the whisper of the rain; inside, a suffocating emptiness.

The quiet was unbearable. He felt trapped in a tin can with a snake. Eliza sat beside him, perfectly still, quietly watching. She wasn't looking at him, but he felt her attention with every nerve in his body. She knew he was afraid, knew he was lying. She knew about the bug — transmitting every second of their suffocating silence straight back to the Agency.

He was sure of it.

His body trembled, even though the heaters kept the cabin comfortably warm. Her soulless calm — that maddening, glacial stillness — seeped into him. He wanted to scream, to demand answers, to shake some kind of reaction out of her, but he stayed silent. He was part of the game now — an agent. Agents kept quiet and waited.

In her profile, in the beads of rain crawling down the window behind her shoulder, he read the same message: *there is no way out*. This car, this dark alley, the woman beside him — the center of his nightmare.

They waited.

Time didn't pass — it seeped, like tar, dripping in seconds down the windshield. The gray day died slowly, surrendering to a thick violet dusk that rose straight out of the wet asphalt.

Then, with a soft click, the alley's only streetlamp flickered on. Its dim, sickly-blue light couldn't push back the darkness. It drowned in the oily puddles, creating on their surface a warped reflection of the world. In that distorted reality, the lamp opened a dark rift into some underwater dimension, staring back at them with strange violet gleams.

No one could tell how long they sat in the car — an hour, two, an eternity. Eliza didn't say a single word, didn't make a single unnecessary movement. She waited, and her patience was as inhuman as her calm.

And when Mark began to think nothing would happen — that this was another meaningless game — he appeared.

A figure emerged from the darkness of the adjacent street: a hunched man in a long, rain-soaked coat. He walked with confidence, not glancing around, as if returning home. He approached the door, fiddled with the lock for a second, and slipped inside.

Mark tensed, his hand instinctively dropping to his holster.

"Wait," Eliza whispered — her first word in hours.

They waited another five minutes, letting the killer begin his work. It wasn't their job to save anyone. Salvation wasn't their department.

"It's time," she finally exhaled.

Cold washed over his face. Eliza moved fast and silently; Mark followed, feeling the long, heavy apathy in his veins flushed out by a surge of adrenaline. They reached the entrance — unlocked.

The door gave way without a creak, opening a passage into ink-black darkness. A breath of ancient dust and damp, swollen furniture met them from inside.

The first floor was abandoned — rooms drowned in clutter and thick shadows. The narrow, steep staircase groaned under their steps.

Halfway up, three gunshots thundered through the house, then another. The whole building shuddered as if someone were firing right into its brick ribs.

On the second floor — a short corridor, a strip of light under one of the doors. Eliza gestured for Mark to stay behind, then slipped forward, pushed the door and slid inside.

The door closed behind her with a soft click.

A heartbeat later, the world tore open with a blast. A deafening, brutal roar from a large-caliber shotgun ripped through the house, shaking the walls again. One shot. Another. A third. A fourth. The light died.

The door in front of Mark — the one Eliza had vanished behind — exploded into fragments. Splinters, plaster, and a hot, sticky spray burst out of the doorway and hit Mark across the face.

He flinched back, pistol snapping up on instinct. Silence followed. The sharp acrid stench of cordite and fresh blood punched him in the nose.

The thought hit instantly, clear and undeniable: *she's dead.* Caught off guard.

For a heartbeat, relief washed through him — vile, shameful. The killer had just lifted the weight of guilt off his shoulders, erased the evidence of betrayal. He shoved the feeling away. Now there was no chance he could take down a borg on his own.

Keeping the blown-open doorway in his sights, Mark pressed against the wall. He waited. Waited for footsteps, movement, anything. But nothing came from the room. Not a sound.

And then, from the darkness inside, came a short, wet, bubbling scream — filled not with pain, but with animal terror.

Mark lunged inside, ready to fire, and stumbled over the broken boards strewn across the floor, crashing into the doorway in a clumsy leap.

The room was packed with furniture. At the far wall, slumped in an armchair, Silas lay motionless — mute forever now. And in the center, facing Mark, stood Eliza. Not a scratch on her.

The borg was on his knees. His severed shotgun-arm lay discarded off to the side; the other clawed at his own neck in frantic jerks, trying to rip off the thin, invisible filament cutting into his throat. Eliza held both ends of the garrote, pulling it tighter slowly, methodically. The borg gurgled; his bulging eyes locked onto Mark.

"Talk. Who's in charge of this sector?" she demanded, her voice disturbingly calm. "Or you'll die slow. Very slow."

"Help— you... you don't see it?!" the borg rasped, staring at Mark with desperate, pleading terror. "Can't you see what she *is*?!"

Mark knew exactly what he meant. He looked into those crazed eyes, then at Eliza's perfectly composed face, and in that second he couldn't tell which of the two was the real monster.

The wire tightened. The borg choked; foam bubbled from his mouth. At last, writhing, he managed to raise his remaining hand and trace a trembling string of numbers and symbols in the air.

Eliza nodded, as if receiving a routine report at her desk, then snapped the garrote outward with a single clean motion. A dry, sickening crack split the silence, a burst of spray— and his head tore free from his shoulders. The body collapsed heavily to the floor.

She planted her boot on the severed head and pressed down hard. The crunch of bone tore through the room, and the skull gave way beneath her weight.

But what spilled out wasn't what Mark expected.

Instead of blood and brain matter, something white and spongy spilled through the fracture — wet, fibrous, like insulation fibers. It fizzed sharply, then short-circuited, and a foul, acrid stench of burning plastic filled the room.

The twitching body on the floor wasn't human. The reek of burning circuitry drowned out the smell of blood. Before it died, it let out a silent scream — full of terror, almost human. It... looked afraid.

Can a machine feel terror? Can a bundle of wires and synthetic padding mimic the agony of dying so convincingly? Or was that just another program — as seamless and polished as its lethal, precise movements in the fight?

Had this borg ever been human, or was it always just a cluster of algorithms, now instructed to die beautifully? And if so — how was Mark any different from this sparking sack of white insulation? Maybe his own terror was nothing more than a perfect simulation too, fed into him by a system he never controlled.

Every boundary Mark had ever known — between the living and the dead, human and machine, real and fabricated — dissolved before his eyes, turning into that nauseating white pulp.

Eliza stepped back from the convulsing, sparking body. She watched it without surprise, without disgust. Only with a distant interest, like someone studying an exotic animal.

"We're done for today," she said, slipping the garrote away.

Intermission 3. Michael

Michael was inside the cell. A sterile chamber meant only for data processing, deaf to any outside interference. His body remained perfectly still: gestures and movement were unnecessary. Everything happened in the mind.

A data packet marked with a red priority flag dropped straight into his consciousness — not as text or video, but as a raw block of information.

Final log of Agent Cassiel.

Processing required 0.7 seconds. The sequence unfolded: coordinates, target biometrics, audio telemetry, bullet trajectories. An identifier transmitted under duress. Nothing critical — just an identification code from another agent. Fracture of C1-C2 vertebrae. Static. Loss of signal.

The protocol had failed. Unanticipated variable: weapon susceptible under torture.

Michael issued a direct request to the technical division:

> Protocol update. Highest priority. Condition: threat of compromise. Action: forced disconnection from the servers.

The analysis of subject Eliza Dahmer was completed even before the update was sent. The status shifted: "research" replaced with "existential threat." Further observation was deemed irrelevant.

The next impulse went out to three tactical teams. Short, like an electric spark:

> Target: Eliza Dahmer. Priority: highest. Directive: capture.

Chapter 12. User Not Found

The thought of being in the same apartment with Eliza was unbearable. Mark didn't go home. Instead, he found Barry in one of the 24-hour bars in the Old City and drank with him until morning, silently, as the world tightened around him, turning into a heavy, murky haze of cheap whiskey.

Barry cracked jokes, complained about the brass, and kept trying to lure him into a brothel down the street. Mark barely heard a word. He nodded, took another burning swallow, and stared into the murky bottom of his glass, where the same scene kept replaying endlessly.

The door exploding into splinters. Blood. His own frantic leap inside, certain she was dead. But she wasn't. And at her feet — the borg, choking in a thin, nearly invisible noose.

"...so I tell her, either work or pretend to work, but don't do both at once!" Barry barked a laugh, elbowing him. "Are you even listening to me?"

"Can't you see what she is?!" — the borg's rasp, raw in memory. The horror in his eyes. Not fear of dying — fear of something impossible, unnatural.

And her boot coming down on the severed head. That dry crack of bone. The burst of white synthetic wadding, sparking wires, the nauseating stench of burning plastic.

"Earth to Mark!" Barry snapped his fingers in front of him. "You're falling apart, partner. It's your funeral. But listen—your captain? She's a real piece of work. Keep your eyes open with her."

For Barry, the borg was just another corpse. He hadn't seen him begging for help, hadn't seen what was inside him. Just another cleanup. But for Mark—it was the moment reality finally broke apart.

He returned near dawn. Pale light barely seeped through the curtain of rain. The apartment greeted him with tense silence. Eliza was already

dressed, already in uniform, ready to leave. He reeked of booze and smoke, but she didn't ask anything, didn't reproach him. Her indifference was worse than any fury.

In the same heavy, viscous silence, they drove to work. The car slid along the wet streets, stubbornly sweeping streams of water from the windshield as if trying to wipe the day away. Mark didn't see the city—only his reflection: gaunt, with dark circles under his eyes. The face of a broken man.

"This is yours," Eliza said, and in her voice Mark heard a fracture for the first time. Not coldness—endless, mortal exhaustion.

The tiny device fell from her palm onto the dashboard with a faint metallic note. Her fingers trembled — barely, but enough.

Part of him collapsed, while another part saw everything with unbearable clarity, down to the smallest detail. There was no sadness left in her eyes—only real, living pain.

In that moment he desperately wanted to tell her everything. About Michael and the Agency. About his lies and betrayal. To warn her, to beg forgiveness for becoming their tool, for letting this happen. He was choking on the truth clawing at his throat. He wanted to speak—but she was faster.

She looked at him as if she had already heard every unsaid word, and a faint smile touched her lips.

"See you, Mark," she whispered.

The next instant, the car jolted. From both the front and the back, blocking the narrow street, two heavy white vans skidded to a stop. Their doors burst open as shock troopers in black tactical suits and sealed helmets poured out. Their movements were inhumanly precise.

The windshield on Eliza's side shattered with a muffled crack inward. A series of quick, hissing pops followed. One dart buried itself in Mark's shoulder, and his body went numb instantly. Six or seven struck Eliza. She jerked with each impact, a faint, strangled moan slipping from her lips.

One of the agents stepped closer, raised his rifle, and fired. The charge hit Eliza right between the eyes. Her body arched, her head snapped back, and two thin streams of blood trickled down her face from the ruptured sockets.

The car door was yanked open, and the agents dragged her limp, convulsing body outside. They shoved her into a bulky metal containment pod.

As the lid was closing, she turned her head toward the car. From the empty, burned-out sockets, what stared at him wasn't darkness but mute, monstrous pain.

It was the last image his mind could withstand.

Intermission 4. Eliza

Darkness. Motion.

No sensations — only the cold of metal and the tight mesh of restraints holding her in place. The pain in her eye sockets had turned into a burning, blunt pressure.

Something clicked. From the smooth walls of the cocoon, thin needles — fine as hair — slid out soundlessly and pierced with mechanical precision: her arms, her neck, her thighs. A searing cocktail of tranquilizers, neuro-blockers, and pain suppressants flooded her veins.

A high, shrill whine came from above her head — a laser scalpel. The pain vanished as the compounds blocked everything. But she felt the vibration as the machine cut through bone. Half her skull was removed like an access panel.

A mechanical arm descended and implanted a foreign device at the center of her brain. Now it would begin replacing her neural cells with synthetic equivalents.

The machines retracted into the walls. Darkness and silence again.

Under the rough bandage across her face, heat pooled. It seeped through the fabric and ran down her cheeks like bloody tears.

Intermission 5. Lily

Upper level.

Beyond the panoramic window, the City shone like an abstract living diagram. A white neon lace of neural networks thrown across a bottomless black void.

Flawless and motionless, like a work of art, Lily Thorne stood at the center of her world. She wasn't looking at the City — she possessed it. Every light in the window was a thread in a pattern she could alter at will.

The door slid aside without disturbing the silence. Amy entered. On a golden tray, she carried a bottle of champagne and two thin crystal flutes, as if carved from pure ice.

Amy's movements resembled a ritual. Millimeter-perfect, fluid, without a single wasted gesture. The pop of the cork sounded muted and ceremonial. The hiss of bubbles rose like a quiet mantra from the depths of the glass. She filled one and offered it to Lily — not an invitation, but an offering, a sacrifice.

"Today is a big day," Amy said, unable to hide her excitement.

Lily took the flute, her fingers barely brushing Amy's.

"Yes." She took a small sip, watching the bubbles burst against the crystal. "Judging by the Agency's reports, everything went exceptionally well. It's always pleasant to read their internal memos."

Lily smiled — a faint, almost absent smile, the kind that made her perfect face seem even less human. She set down the glass and pulled Amy toward her for a long, unhurried kiss. Not an act of passion, but a seal of blessing, a mark of ownership.

"Michael has nothing left to use against us," Lily said quietly. "But... our protégé worries me. He's still in the Pact, and that irritates me more than anything. We've used everything we had."

Amy tilted her head slightly, her voice soft, almost caressing:

"Yes, it is strange. But you couldn't have been wrong, Bev?"

Lily's face darkened for a moment, and a flicker of irritation sharpened her voice.

"I am never wrong, Jennifer," she stressed the name like a blow. "It *is* him. And yet all our efforts — wasted. Incomprehensible."

Amy dipped her head ever so slightly — whether in agreement or courtesy, impossible to tell.

"Maybe he's simply stubborn. Or the timing was poor. The mistake might not be yours — but your daughter's."

Lily fixed her with a long, heavy look. The word *stubborn* hung in the sterile air. A simple, human, pathetic word. A grain of sand in her immaculate machine.

She turned back toward the panorama of the City, glittering below.

"So..." she began, and the irritation vanished, leaving only icy resolve. "Then we try again. Later. Let him believe he's free."

Amy nodded silently; her faint smile slipped away, replaced by the familiar mask of the perfect assistant. She stepped forward and refilled Lily's glass.

The day went on. And Mark Kane, without realizing it, had received the most unpleasant gift Lily Thorne could give him — time.

Intermission 6. Mark

Consciousness returned with the taste of chemical sludge in his mouth and one arm completely numb. He rubbed it for a few minutes, trying to chase away the harsh, painful tingling. The car was parked in some filthy, forgotten alley in the Ring.

Mark tried to sit up straight, and his head responded with a dull, pulsing ache. The last thing he remembered was Eliza's burned-out eye sockets in the metal sarcophagus, and then velvet darkness.

He scanned the car in a frantic rush. No shattered glass. No signs of struggle. On his shoulder, where the dart had struck, there wasn't even a puncture in the fabric of his jacket. He examined the cloth — untouched.

Another nightmare. Brutal, vivid, but only a nightmare.

Trying to scrub off the nauseating aftertaste clinging to him, he rubbed his face hard with both hands. He needed to contact someone — hear Barry's voice, for instance, to feel real again. To explain everything to Eliza.

"System," he forced out at last. "Center, Department C."

"Subscriber not found," the cuff replied.

Mark froze.

"What? Repeat."

"Subscriber not found."

A coldness, unrelated to the morning air, spread through his veins.

"Eliza, Barry?!"

"I do not recognize these subscribers," the device said flatly.

Panic flooded him. He scrambled through his contacts. Everyone he knew at the Center — gone. Wiped out. Or they had never existed at all.

"Connect me to the Second Precinct."

The precinct's emblem flickered on the holo for a moment, then the connection was established.

"Police Precinct Two. How may I—"

"Put the captain on, you idiot," Mark snapped. No need to be polite with an auto-receptionist.

The answer came instantly, without hesitation.

"You were terminated over a month ago, citizen Kane. Reason: failure to report for duty. Connection to the acting captain is not available to non-staff. Is there anything else I can assist you with?"

A month. He hadn't been transferred to the Center. He had simply been thrown out of the police. The Center, Barry, Eliza-the-captain — none of it had happened. It had all taken place only in his mind.

The car swayed beneath him like a boat. He flung the door open and collapsed onto the pavement, vomiting onto the wet asphalt. Gasping and coughing on all fours, he knew with sick certainty he'd gone insane. Completely. The only logical conclusion.

Staggering, he crawled back into the seat, slammed the door shut, and dropped his head onto the console. One last, desperate thought flared in his mind. Proof.

The bug. He searched the panel feverishly, running his hands across every surface. Eliza had left it for him before they took her. But it wasn't there. Smooth, clean plastic.

Even the bug — his only anchor and his last piece of evidence — was gone.

The system had worked flawlessly. It erased people, events, and every trace that might implicate itself. Mark was left alone, in an empty car, in the middle of a reality that had won a final and devastating victory over his memory.

Chapter 13. The Ninth Circle

Winter came to the Ring reluctantly — dragging itself in like a dying animal. It didn't cover the place with a white shroud; it merely dusted its wounds with a thin, ashen film of snow that melted at once, turning the streets into gray slush. Wind howled through empty window frames and moaned in rusted pipes. Cold lived on the streets, in the apartments, in other people's beds — and inside him. It soaked into concrete walls and the perpetually crumpled sheets he slept in. Even his blood crawled through his veins slowly, like molten lead.

He was having the same dream again.

In it, he wakes in that empty, lifeless room. In the middle of it stands a plain wooden table, and behind it sits a little girl with braids, drawing something in a sketchbook. In the dream, Mark knows he must get up. He rises from the bed, his legs moving on their own.

He walks toward the table, and the girl lifts her head. Where her eyes should be are two raw, bloody hollows. A dark stain of blood spreads across her chest.

She holds out a plate to him, and on it, like two pale eggs, lie a pair of eyes. One is light — nearly translucent. The other is dark, ink-black.

"She left you her eyes," the girl says. "Eat."

And she laughs. A child's bright, piercing laughter — the same he'd heard back then, in that empty hallway of the abandoned house. That laugh snapped Mark awake for real.

He stared at the ceiling for several minutes, watching shadows dissolve in the grim morning light. The dream brought no relief. Not rest, but another turn of the same infernal cycle — and he surfaced from it with that familiar pulsing headache behind his eyes.

In the apartment — dead silence.

Mark was no one now. A former cop, dismissed for absenteeism, erased from the system. The only thing he'd managed to do in that chaos right after Eliza's abduction was transfer what remained of his City savings into Ring credits. Enough to rent Eliza's empty apartment and buy cheap whiskey. Enough to slowly rot.

Every day became a copy of the last — a blurred, indistinguishable imprint on the melting snow of days. He no longer woke to an alarm clock, but to the cold that crept through the thin blanket and bit straight into his bones. Time had stopped mattering altogether. No work shifts, no reports, not even hunger to divide the day into "before" and "after."

His cuff had gone dark long ago. One morning, tired of that silent green light — the mockery, the reminder of the system that had crossed him out — Mark took it off. That piece of metal felt foreign on his skin. He tossed it into an empty drawer of the dresser — the same one where he had once found Eliza's graveyard of cuffs. Let it lie there among the rest of the dead.

The only ritual separating sleep from waking was the first swig. He reached for the bottle standing by the bed on the floor. Cheap whiskey that reeked of varnish. A swallow instead of coffee, instead of breakfast — to jump-start the body. Fuel for his muscles instead of living.

Then he had to step outside. Not because there was anywhere to go, but because the silence of this apartment, saturated with memories, suffocated him worse than the cold. He pulled on his jacket, opened the door, descended the creaking stairs, and stepped into his personal, recurring hell.

Before beginning his aimless rounds, he always turned into the neighboring alley where the car stood under a layer of snow and grime. Invisible to the system, erased from every registry — just like him — and disconnected from the network. He brushed the snow from the windshield, peered into the cabin where his world had collapsed. Sometimes he sat inside for a few minutes, inhaling the smell of frozen plastic. The only place that remembered everything exactly as he did.

He followed the same roads leading nowhere, like a pilgrim visiting ruined shrines. The Center's office had been here once; now it was a boarded-up warehouse with a sun-bleached, cracked sign. He would stand across

from it for long stretches, trying to glimpse the ghost of the old reality beneath the new one, but saw only dusty glass and his own reflection.

He went to the bar where he used to drink with Barry. Behind the counter stood a sullen kid, who, when asked about a detective with stubble, only shrugged and muttered through clenched teeth: "Don't know him."

He scanned the blank, tired faces in the market crowd, hoping for a spark of recognition, for a familiar silhouette that his sinking, half-mad memory could cling to. No luck.

He carefully avoided the Legion patrols — black jackets, white cross — and they, in turn, didn't notice him. They had a perfect nose for City cops. Even if he wasn't one anymore.

He wasn't searching for evidence — there was none. What he was hunting now were ghosts. A shadow himself, he was stalking other shadows in a city that had erased their names from its memory, searching for proof of his own existence.

By evening, when the cold became unbearable and the futility of wandering weighed heavier than fatigue, instinct always carried him to the same place — *Babylon*. Here, at least, his personal past still had weight, crude as its currency was: a corpse and a pool of blood.

The bar greeted him with its usual dim lighting and the smell of cheap perfume that clung to everything. The music blared loudly, yet it felt distant, as if coming from another world. Every evening he sat at the same table, ordered the same bourbon — and the scene came alive again: the reflection in the polished surface of the counter, and for a moment he imagined that any second now he would see that impeccably dressed, inhumanly calm borg.

He nodded to familiar faces — the regulars — but never started conversations. No one sat with him, either. In *Babylon*, everyone respected boundaries. His solitude had become a ritual. A swallow of whiskey — not an attempt to forget, but a challenge: *I'm still here. I remember everything.*

But the bar never answered.

People don't drink to forget — they drink to see what they want to see.

And Mark drank.

That evening went the same way as always: the same table, the same glass, the same dull roar of drunken voices. Whiskey no longer had any taste

or smell for him — only warmth, spreading through his body, blunting the jagged edges of memory. He drank so that in the reflection of the glass or the counter a familiar silhouette might flicker, so that from the murky shimmer a face might emerge — the face he was searching for.

But instead of a familiar face, he saw someone who did not belong to this place at all.

The girl walked as though the suffocating haze existed for everyone except her. Smooth, precise movements — alien in a world of jerking, exhausted bodies.

She sat down in the chair opposite him. Mark caught a faint, utterly out-of-place trace of sterile cleanliness. Too young, too beautiful, and above all too clean for this place. No signs of fatigue, none of the grayness that seeped into the faces of the bar's regulars. She was from the City.

"Is this seat taken?" she asked — bold, unconcerned, without even a shadow of fear.

"It is," he muttered, continuing to stare at his glass.

She ignored the answer. A soft rustle of expensive fabric — and her hands rested on the sticky surface of the table. Graceful, immaculate, as if sculpted from ivory. On the back of her hand — drawn in thin, almost invisible bio-ink — a mark.

The alcoholic numbness vanished at once, as if he'd been plunged into ice water.

A message. A taunt. Lily Thorne, sitting in her white tower, was toying with him, pulling invisible strings as if he were her puppet. She knew exactly where he was — and she wanted him to know that she knew.

Instincts dulled by alcohol and exhaustion stirred for a moment. This little doll was just another scalpel in Lily's hands. She was cutting a nerve and watching to see how he would twitch. Why did she still need him? Was she still playing with him?

In the haze of smoke thickening the bar's air, the facts aligned into a single, inevitable conclusion.

The answer was simple — and monstrous. Lily had brought him and Eliza together. Allowed them to grow close, let him feel — for the first time in years — that he wasn't alone. Then she created the perfect circumstances for him to betray her. For Eliza to be arrested. Their entire story — from

the first meeting on the rooftop to that last silence in the car — had been staged. He had played the lead without ever knowing it.

In the role of Judas — citizen Kane.

Something didn't add up in that chain of thought. It had been Eliza who sent him to Lily. Eliza, who drew the mark on the wall. Why?

But alcohol and fatigue did their work — thinking became impossible. So he cast the thought aside.

The girl sat across from him, waiting for an answer, the same empty, rehearsed smile frozen on her lips.

"I'm looking for someone. I was told you could help," she said, in a friendly tone so false it made his teeth ache. "They say you're a former cop."

Lily was showing him he couldn't hide. They could reach him whenever they pleased.

"I'll pay well," the girl went on, ignoring his silence. "Maybe we should go somewhere private? It's too loud here."

An empty, stupid doll. His stomach twisted. At her lies, at his life, at the reach of BioTech — long enough to grab him even here, at the bottom of the Ring.

No. Not tonight.

"Screw it," he muttered and stood up.

He let her walk ahead toward the exit. But the moment she pushed open the main door, he slipped away — turning sharply into the dim corridor leading toward the bathrooms and the back door. He moved quickly and silently — a habit built over years. He shoved the heavy, rusted door and spilled out into the alley.

Into a wall of blinding, white snow.

The street met him with a howl of wind and shards of ice that clawed at his face like a swarm of crystal needles tipped with steel. The Ring was gone. Streetlights, neighboring buildings — all dissolved into a blinding, white storm. Sound itself drowned in that chaos; only the low, guttural moan of the blizzard remained.

Mark took a few unsteady steps, shielding himself from the wind. Drunk, disoriented, he felt like this snowstorm was part of the dream as well, just another layer of it. He stumbled forward, seeing nothing, until he collided with something soft — too soft for this white hell.

A muffled thud, a woman's startled cry, and the scatter of objects spilling across the snow. Snow slapped his face and everything blurred. In front of him, a girl was kneeling, trying to gather books from the drifts. She was wrapped in a heavy coat and scarf, and the only thing Mark could make out was her visor — an old model — glowing faintly white in the blizzard.

"Damn," she exhaled, and the storm ripped the word to shreds.

Mark dropped to his knees, and his fingers — stiff with cold — brushed against a soaked spine. A book. Old, bound in leather. He lifted it, and snow slid from it like white ash. The title was embossed in worn, unfamiliar letters. Beside it lay another, and another. All of them ancient, heavy — completely out of place here in the Ring, in the middle of a storm.

"Thank you!" she shouted over the wind, taking the books from him and trying to hold the slippery stack together. "An icy hell — like the traitors' circle in Cocytus. You're very kind."

Mark gave a crooked smirk, and she caught it. She lifted her head, and in her lenses his distorted reflection flickered.

"You should find shelter somewhere, in your... condition. You'll freeze out here," she added. "My name is Mari. I have a little shop around the corner. Come on — we'll be buried alive if we stay."

She pointed into the darkness where nothing existed except the spiraling snow, and without waiting for an answer walked ahead, moving with a confidence that seemed impossible in this chaos. Mark, frozen through and utterly lost, trudged after her. Any place was better than this white, spinning void. There was no other path.

Mari led him to a heavy wooden door beneath a faded, nearly erased sign. Through the worn Gothic lettering one could just make out the word "Bookshop," and below it — the name: Threshold.

Maybe the same shop Barry had shown him on the terminal screen in another life? Another sting of illusion. Another proof of his own madness.

Inside, it was warm, and the air smelled of long-forgotten things — old paper, binding glue, and a faint, elusive spice foreign to this world. The scent of history and rest. Two shelves along the walls, an aisle, and a door — presumably leading to her room. A staircase to the second floor. A separate universe, fallen out of the blizzard and the chaos of the Ring.

"The storm will pass soon," Mari said, placing her heavy burden on the counter. "But you should stay until then. My apartment's here."

She nodded toward the door.

"I've got tea. And whiskey, if you prefer."

He was far too worn out to refuse.

Her apartment — or rather, her room — turned out to be just like the shop: quiet, cozy, and utterly unlike anything he'd seen in the Ring. Walls buried entirely under bookshelves. An old, worn-out sofa. The soft crackle of an electric heater. It all looked like a stage set for a play about the world before the war.

She took off her coat and scarf, and he could finally see her better. Painfully thin — sharp bones jutting beneath her skin; translucent ash-blond hair falling onto her shoulders. She didn't remove the visor, even here. A narrow strip of metal covering her eyes glowed faintly in the dim room — a gaze hidden behind an electronic mirror.

"Do you always wear it?" Mark asked.

"Yes," she answered softly, placing two cups on the table. "During the war, we lived on the coast. They shelled us with phosphorus rockets. Since then, I can't stand bright light."

She said it calmly, stating a fact, without self-pity. And in that calm there was something that cut into him. He remembered the war too. He knew what it meant to live with something that would never truly leave you.

In this small room, beside a half-blind girl who saw the world through a strip of dark glass, for the first time since his exile began, he wanted to open his mouth not to curse, but to actually speak. To say something that mattered.

A sip of hot tea burned his tongue, but the taste was real. Mari settled across from him, her hands wrapped around her cup.

"I've seen you many times here, in the Old City," she said quietly. "But you... you've never seen me. You always look for someone. You walk the same routes, stare at empty buildings. Drink at the bar. And then it all repeats itself."

She took a sip and added, almost casually:

"Maybe tonight you should try something different? Let's pretend you found me. People say I'm good at sorting out other people's problems."

So she hadn't been watching him — she had *seen* him. Seen his ritual, his despair. And Mari wasn't pressing him, wasn't demanding anything — she was... offering. Leaving him a way out.

"I..." he began, and the words he'd held inside for so long tore loose, bursting out of him like an abscess breaking open — broken, desperate.

"I don't know if I've lost my mind. I think I have. People disappear. Places where I was yesterday — today they're empty. I remember colleagues, friends... and they're gone too. The Center is gone. Eliza..." He choked on the name, swallowing it with effort. "Maybe she never existed either."

He gripped the cup so hard his knuckles whitened.

"I walk the streets and I don't recognize them. Yesterday it was the Center, today a warehouse. I've seen signs... the same ones. On walls, on people. It all forms a pattern, but the moment I try to focus — it vanishes. Maybe I just started drinking myself into a hole back then... before Eliza."

Outside, snow kept falling — steady, stubborn, knowing neither time nor fatigue.

"And now all of this is my reality. A reality I can't escape. Madness." He let out a bitter laugh. "I don't know what scares me more: that I've gone insane, or that all of this is real."

With every word, he felt both lighter and more terrified. Lighter because he was letting the poison out. More terrified because believing his own words was impossible. Mari listened silently, sipping her tea.

"And now here I am," he finished, staring into the empty cup. "No job, no past. Just memories of a world that never existed."

He waited for pity or fear. For her to say something like *you need a doctor*. To ask him to leave. The room was lit by the trembling reflection of snowfall outside — alive, flickering, scattering a million sparks.

"What's real is whatever feels real to you, Mark," Mari said suddenly.

It sounded as if she were revealing some ancient, universal law. Then she leaned forward a little.

"Tell me about Eliza. What is she like? Do you love her?"

Only later did he realize that Mari could not have known his name.

Chapter 14. Forget Her

Her question was simple, direct — and utterly impossible. After everything he'd told her about shifts and erasures in reality, she hadn't asked about any of that. She went straight to the core — to the one thing at the heart of his pain and his obsession.

"What is she like?" Mark repeated, staring into his empty cup as if the answer might be hiding in the pattern of leaves at the bottom. "She showed me the world was a lie — and turned out to be the biggest lie of all. She's a killer, as far as I know. A drug dealer. A billionaire. She lives double, triple lives — God only knows how many at once. For her, I was just a stone thrown into water. A tool she used."

There was genuine bewilderment in his voice, as if he himself had only now realized he didn't know the answer.

"Do I love her? I don't know. Can you love a ghost on a rooftop who talked to you about... things? Can you love a nightmare if it's the only reality you have left? I got attached to her the way a prisoner gets attached to his cell. She was the only key to my madness, and now I have neither key nor door."

Mari's visor caught the dull light of the lamp; her face remained unreadable, like a page torn from one of her ancient books. When he fell silent, she took a sip of tea.

"But you betrayed her," she said. "Isn't that why you're here, in the Ring? You could have tried going back to the City, starting over. But you didn't. You stayed. In the bar. In her apartment. You're punishing yourself, Mark. It's time you realized you need to move forward, not chase answers that have vanished. You are more than you think you are."

Her words were a diagnosis — precise and absolutely correct. With a single merciless sentence, she sliced open his self-deception. He wasn't hid-

ing; he was serving a self-imposed sentence in the hell Eliza had built for him.

"Come," Mari said softly. "I want to show you something."

She led him up the creaking staircase to the roof. The snowfall had nearly stopped; the few large flakes drifted lazily in the streetlights, settling onto the black, rain-soaked surface of the roof. The world had gone quiet under a white shroud, and the City's sounds were swallowed by the soft, cottony hush of snow.

They approached the edge, and a thick, nauseating déjà vu washed over him. The same rooftop and parapet, the same distant glow of the City's towers. Mari was deliberately — almost theatrically — recreating that night. Only instead of pouring rain, there was gentle snow; instead of a demon-tempter, a half-blind bookseller.

"Forget her for a moment," Mari whispered. "Forget the love, the betrayal, everything she did. Tell me — what do *you* want, Mark? Truly?"

Her question pulled the trigger. Something inside him, wound tight to breaking, finally snapped. Rage surged up — blind and boiling — at Lily for playing him; at Michael with his lying mask; at the dreams tearing his world apart; at Eliza, who had been all of that at once.

"Destruction," he spat, breath steaming in the cold. "I want to burn everything to the ground. Their towers, their lies, this damned Ring... everything they built. To destroy it all and grind it into the dirt. Burn it down to the bare foundations."

Lost in that fury, he didn't notice the faint smile ghosted across Mari's lips — subtle, invisible, full of quiet satisfaction.

"But I can't let her go. I can't," Mark added after a long pause, voice hollow.

"Look," Mari said, pointing toward the gleaming towers of the City. Mark shuddered at the gesture, at the eerie repetition. "You want to destroy their world. And what have you become in this fight? Everyone plays you — the corporations, those agents, Eliza, Lily... You've become their weapon, a stone thrown into water. You want to shatter someone else's cage, but you don't even try to step out of your own. Why don't *you* take control for once?"

From the alley came drunken shouting. Two drunks, arms around each other, were bellowing some filthy song across the Ring — their chorus sounded like mockery, a jeer flung into the stillness of the empty streets.

Soon their hoarse, off-key voices faded somewhere around the corner. Mari's words throbbed in his temples.

Why don't you take matters into your own hands? That's ridiculous.

"How?" he asked, turning away from the City. "How am I supposed to take anything into my own hands when I'm no one? *They* are corporations, they're power. Borgs. Compared to them, I'm an insect. I don't even know where to begin."

"You begin by looking for information," she replied, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "Even ghosts leave traces. Especially digital ghosts."

Her visor caught the reflection of distant lights as she stepped closer.

"You can't fight the City on its home ground. But here, in the Ring, they don't have absolute control. Here there are other forces. Here there is the Legion."

Of course, he'd heard of the Legion. The white cross on black. The only syndicate with structure, with a code, the faction that dominated the Council of gangs.

"The leader of the Legion is Derek," Mari continued. "He's a veteran like you. The Legion controls all trade in the Ring. Derek is the one most likely to know about the borgs. He doesn't like ghosts operating on his territory — especially those from the City. He can make inquiries with Major or Pops."

She stepped very close, eclipsing the glow of the City behind her.

"I can arrange a meeting. If you're ready to talk to a real person instead of your memories."

Mari stood before him — a fragile silhouette against the winter sky. She was offering him something he hadn't had in a very long time — a purpose. A chance. And, more frightening than anything — hope.

"Yes," he said at last. "I'm ready."

They descended from the roof into the quiet, warm apartment. Mark replayed his outburst and her strange proposal in his mind. He looked at her differently now, trying to see, behind the visor and the fragile frame,

the person who spoke so easily about one of the most powerful men in the Ring.

"How do you know all this?" he asked. "About the Legion, about Derek? You're not just a bookseller. Who *are* you, Mari?"

Mari poured more tea and turned to him.

"Books aren't my real business, Mark," she said gently. "It's information. You think the only currency in the Ring is weapons and drugs? For pawns — yes. But the real players, the gang leaders — they're after something else. They're after power."

She placed the cup in front of him.

"There are hundreds of small cults, sects, groups in the Ring. All of them believe that in old texts, in pre-war grimoires and rituals, there's a key. A key to escaping this hell. To gaining strength and power. Esoterica is in high demand here. It's a very profitable business."

Sitting across from him, she watched him drink his tea.

"Derek is one of those who understands that real power lies not in weapons, but in knowledge. He's not a collector or a hobbyist. He's searching for answers. That's why he's my best and most trusted client."

Her words seemed to hang in the cold, reflected in the snowy window. Mark stared at this fragile girl and tried to reconcile her appearance with what she was saying. A purveyor of forbidden knowledge to the most dangerous men in the Ring. His mind refused to accept it.

"So all this... esoterica — it isn't just nonsense?" he asked, nodding toward the shelves packed with ancient books. "What is someone like Derek looking for in them?"

"He's looking for the same thing all my clients are looking for, Mark. Another explanation. A way out. A means to step beyond, to gain power, to ascend. They believe the world isn't what it seems — and they hope the answers are written on these pages."

She gestured lightly at the bookcases.

The rage that had boiled in Mark on the rooftop finally burned itself out, leaving behind an abyss. He was empty. His world destroyed, his feelings a lie, his hatred powerless. And the truth — what *was* this world, really?

"What's happening to me?" he asked, and the question sounded like a plea. "All these shifts, the voices... what is it really?"

Mari's sharp knees were almost touching his leg.

"Long ago, in ancient Indian texts," she began slowly, "they said that our world is *maya* — an illusion. We're all dreaming the same dream — shared, detailed, and therefore convincing. In that dream we're born, we live, we die."

She drew invisible patterns on the table with her fingertip.

"But sometimes... someone begins to see *their own* dream. Wakes up inside the shared one, lives in their own world. And if their will is strong enough, the borders between dreams thin out. A personal dream seeps into the common one, like ink into water, changing the rules for everyone nearby. Such people gain power. They reshape the world however they please. The old texts had many names for them: asuras, pishachas, a hundred other titles. In other teachings, they're called demons."

It sounded insane, yet there was a logic in that insanity.

"Demons... they shape their own reality," Mari went on, more quietly. "They learn to make their dream as real as the shared one. They impose their will, their dreams, on others. They want to become new gods — dreaming a new world into existence."

Seeing how tense and intent his face had become, she suddenly laughed — light, almost childlike.

"Don't take it too seriously," she said, shattering the entire mystical mood. "I'm just repeating what I've read. I have a lot of this sort of literature here, and evenings in the Ring are unbearably dull."

Outside, the storm gathered strength again, turning into a full blizzard. The wind howled through the old flue, and the lone streetlamp in the alley flickered twice before dying for good. The room fell into complete darkness, lit only by the faint glow of Mari's visor and the restless glitter of snow. It was long past midnight.

"I don't know about you, but I'm ready for dreams — any dream, even a shared one," Mari said, and there was a hint of weariness in her voice.

"Yes, it's late," Mark said abruptly, rising to his feet. A wave of alienation washed over him — he felt out of place, unnecessary. "I should go. Thanks for the tea."

"Go where?" She turned toward him, and her visor seemed to look straight into his soul. "There's a blizzard out there. You'll freeze. Stay."

She offered it the same way she had offered tea earlier, without flirtation and without hidden meaning.

And he stayed.

Mari made up the old, worn sofa for him, brought him a blanket that smelled of dusty books and something else — faintly sharp, like dried herbs. He lay down without undressing, watching her silhouette move across the dark room before disappearing behind the door.

In this strange, quiet apartment at the heart of the Ring's chaos, he lay listening to the wind howl outside. For the first time in weeks, he didn't feel like a hunted animal or a ghost. He didn't know who Mari was — a savior or a manipulator — but beside her, the world had stopped tearing itself apart.

As he drifted toward sleep, he expected the usual heavy nightmare.

But only silence came.

Chapter 15. The Fundamental Limitation

October was living out its last days, hurling fistfuls of wet, browning leaves against the tall windows of the lecture hall. The wind howled; even the air outside the institute felt steeped in anxiety. Rumors of an impending war with the Eastern Bloc had seeped out of news broadcasts into everyday conversations, becoming as familiar a backdrop as the damp, inhospitable weather.

Beverly Gacy wasn't looking out the window, and the rumors didn't concern her. She sat in the third row, with every bit of her attention fixed on the lecturer. Her assistant on the comm dutifully recorded both the lecture and the key points. It wasn't necessary — the recording would be available online — but Beverly preferred her own notes. She liked to control the process from start to finish. No wonder she was the best in the program. And not just the best — she *thought* on a different level. Where other students saw a pile of facts for an exam, she saw a system, the elegant and deeply imperfect architecture of the human body.

Beside her sat Jennifer, her roommate and the only true friend she had. If Beverly was sharp as a scalpel, Jennifer was warm and a little chaotic. She embodied that classic American beauty celebrated in posters and films of the previous century — blonde hair tied in a loose bun, and an open, friendly face.

For a moment, she lifted her eyes from her notebook and smiled.

Beverly loved that smile — sweet, slightly shy, with dimples appearing on her cheeks. Sincere and warm enough to make Beverly forget the lecture for a heartbeat.

But the smile vanished at once. Jennifer cast an anxious glance at the window, at the bare branches thrashing in the wind, then bent over her paper notebook — her comm was too outdated for proper note-taking. She

was a person from another, slower, more analog world. And that world was cracking, like ice underfoot.

"...and that is precisely the fundamental limitation," said Professor Albright from the lectern — an elderly yet vigorous dean of the neurobiology department. "Nature made us intelligent, yes, but imperfect. The speed of our synapses is a crawl next to photonic processors. Our brain is a magnificent tool, but still an analog tool in an approaching digital age. And while the East overwhelms us with sheer numbers and manufacturing capacity, our only possible answer is technological evolution. Overcoming biological limits."

His words hung in the hushed auditorium. The students understood what he was talking about. Not a lecture, but a manifesto of the coming era. The professor paused and took a sip of water.

"Think about it!" he continued, with the same fervent intensity, scanning the room. "Direct modulation of neural ensembles. Synthetic synapses operating at the speed of light. We're not just talking about improving memory or reaction time. We're talking about full integration of consciousness with external computational power. This is the next step. While Eastern politicians build more factories to churn out more tanks, we — here, in the West — must build... a new human. A human whose mind is no longer bound by biology. Otherwise, the coming conflict will crush us under sheer mass. Mark my words. The future belongs to neurobiocomputational interfaces."

The lecture ended, and the students hurried toward their dorms. Friday — two days of freedom ahead.

Albright beckoned Beverly over.

"Miss Gacy, a moment, please."

She walked up to the lectern. The professor gave her an approving look as he gathered his papers into his briefcase.

"Your recent paper on synaptic plasticity... it's not just good. It's... well, not revolutionary, of course, but I've sent it to my colleagues at BioTech."

Beverly stopped breathing. BioTech was almost mythical — the leading force in neurotechnology, the corporation shaping the future itself.

"They're opening a new branch here, in the Midwest," Albright continued. "The focus is neurobiocomputational interfaces. The most advanced

field there is. They're impressed with your potential, Beverly, and they're offering you a position in the research group as soon as you graduate."

All the surrounding noise receded, drowned out by the heavy thrum of blood in her temples. The provincial institute, the dull little town, even the looming war — all of it felt distant and insignificant. A door to a *real* future had opened before her, one she'd hardly dared to imagine.

The world outside the tall windows — the wind, the bare trees, the gray sky — suddenly looked unreal, like a faint backdrop. Beverly didn't remember leaving the lecture hall.

"Well?" Jen caught up with her in the corridor, anxiously fidgeting with her comm. "Why did Albright call you? Another conference?"

Beverly looked at her friend, but her excitement was so overwhelming she couldn't force out a single word. They stepped outside; a gust of wind slapped their faces, making them pull their coats tighter.

"Jen..." Beverly finally exhaled. "BioTech. They offered me a job. Right after graduation."

Jennifer froze for a second in the middle of the walkway, her face lighting up with sheer delight.

"Bev!" She threw her arms around her friend. "I knew it! I always knew you were a genius! This is... this is incredible! Are you moving to Bismarck? Or... to the main office?!"

Her joy was genuine — but, as always, it quickly gave way to that familiar, deep-rooted anxiety. She glanced around at the grim-faced students hurrying past.

"It's wonderful!" she repeated, softer. "But... did you hear the latest reports? They say the East is preparing a full resource blockade. What if the war starts? What happens to all these projects then?"

Beverly shrugged off her worries with the ease of someone already sitting in a lifeboat while the rest of the ship was sinking.

"War?" She let out a brief, amused laugh. "Jen, if war starts, people like me... like *us* will be needed more than ever. This is our chance."

There was a cold, calculating gleam in her eyes.

"Everything will be fine. I promise you."

They walked toward the dorms, wind scattering wet leaves around them. Jen held her hand as if afraid the next gust might carry Beverly away

along with her impossible promises. She said nothing, but Beverly felt her worry — a small, nervous tremor in her fingers.

Beverly, on the contrary, had never felt calmer. BioTech's offer wasn't about a job. It was confirmation that she was different, that her mind wasn't a tool for passing exams but a key — a key that could open the doors to the real world, the one lying beyond this dull, dying town.

She looked at the brown, cheerless campus buildings, at students burying their faces in scarves, and for the first time saw them not as her peers but as remnants of a fading era. They feared war, feared shortages, feared the future. And her? She saw the future not as a threat — but as a boundless field for experimentation.

"Overcoming biological limitations" — Professor Albright's words echoed in her mind not as a hypothesis but as a personal motto. She had always felt trapped — trapped in a cage of provincial life, of her own imperfect, fragile human body. And now BioTech was giving her a way out.

"Our chance," she'd said to Jen. And she truly believed it. She would pull them both out. Jen — with her fears, with her kindness — was the only anchor Beverly had in this world. And that anchor she intended to take with her onto her new, gleaming ship.

By the time they reached their room, Beverly felt as though those thirty minutes had held an entire lifetime. She released Jen's hand and looked at her with a triumphant smile.

"Tomorrow's Saturday," she said. "No lectures. I'll go into town, buy us something to celebrate. This is just the beginning, Jen."

The next day, Beverly boarded the old shuttle bus to Carver Falls. Jen stayed on campus to study for a quiz — though Beverly suspected she simply wanted to be alone, to sink into her quiet anxiety.

Beverly didn't mind. Today she wanted to be alone with her triumph as well.

The bus crawled along the highway, creaking and swaying. The road split the endless, dark forest that defined this part of Dakota. Ancient pines rose in a dense wall, their tops lost in the low, gray sky. Yesterday's wind had died down, but the sky hadn't cleared. On the contrary — the clouds were thickening, turning into heavy, ominous masses. The weather was clearly getting worse.

But Beverly didn't notice. She was thinking about BioTech's laboratories, about the possibilities opening before her, about a new life in a big city far from this nowhere town. She glanced at the news on her comm: "Eastern Bloc announces full export ban...", "Analysts: probability of direct military conflict..." — and locked the screen with an irritated swipe. She didn't want to think about anything except her future.

Her future — bright and safe — unlike the rest of the world, teetering on the verge of collapse.

In Carver Falls, she wandered through its few lonely streets, feeling like a tourist in her own past. She stepped into a shop with the painfully generic name "YOUR SHOP" — the only decent place in town — and with her last bit of money bought a box of handmade chocolate truffles and a small bottle of champagne. A silly, impulsive purchase, but she didn't care. Soon she would be able to afford anything she wanted.

She stood on the main square under the heavy, sulking sky and was about to eat the first chocolate when her comm buzzed.

Mom.

Beverly cursed herself — she hadn't even thought to call her yesterday. After her father died, her mother remarried the owner of a car repair shop, and life in Clear Creek, Montana, went on in its own way, separate from Beverly's. They had drifted apart, living in different worlds, and Beverly, buried in her studies, called less and less often.

"Mom! Hi!" Beverly answered, her voice ringing with barely contained happiness. "I have amazing news, unbelievable news! I—"

"Bevvy, sweetheart..." her mother's voice on the other end was quiet, tearful. It instantly smothered all of Beverly's joy, like someone had thrown ice water in her face. "I'm so sorry, honey. So, so sorry."

The box of chocolates suddenly felt heavy and out of place.

"Mom, what happened? Something with my stepdad... with Dad?"

"No, he... he's fine," her mother sobbed. "It's the money, Bevvy. The money for your final year."

"What about the money?" Beverly's voice trembled.

"Remember three years ago, when Frank invested part of your college fund in that second auto shop? He said it was a safe investment... But then all those new cars came out, with their new engines and all those electron-

ics. Nobody wants to repair old gas clunkers anymore. Both shops... they barely bring in anything anymore. We put one up for sale..." She sobbed again. "Yesterday we finally sold it. That money won't cover your final year. And student loans — they aren't giving them out anymore, they keep talking about the war. Sweetheart, I'm so, so sorry... there's no money left. Forgive me."

Her mother kept talking, but Beverly no longer heard her. Her lips moved lifelessly, and the comm went dark.

She stood there for a minute, holding it in her hand, listening to the busy tone and the wind's howl. This couldn't be real. She had invested too much for everything to collapse so easily. She shifted the bag of chocolates, from hand to hand, not knowing what to do with them.

Her brilliant, analytical mind — the one Professor Albright valued so highly — started working with merciless precision, assembling the logical chain:

No money.

No final year.

No diploma.

No BioTech.

No future.

No — there *was* a future.

When a war breaks out, there is always demand for those who can patch up human flesh. Even for those who didn't finish their degree.

The work in gleaming laboratories, the creation of a new kind of human, the overcoming of biological limitations — all of it had stayed behind in yesterday's happy day. Now another career awaited her: a field hospital. Mud, blood, and screams. She wouldn't be building the future — she'd be stitching together the present, torn to shreds, until a stray shell tore her apart in turn.

The box of chocolates slipped from her numb fingers and fell into the wet, slushy snow. Mud seeped into the bright, festive wrapping.

The future she had spun for herself overnight turned out to be as bleak as the sky above her.

She bent down mechanically and picked up the box. Her fingers felt neither cold nor wet; they simply clenched around this useless, foolish symbol of a celebration that would never happen.

Without knowing how, she wandered off the square. Her body kept walking, but her mind stayed behind, next to that stupid shop window and its ten-percent discount sign. She moved through the dreary streets of Carver Falls, noticing neither the occasional passersby nor the storefronts. Her whole world, so vast and dazzling five minutes ago, had shrunk to this dim, miserable little town.

She eventually reached a small, neglected park on the edge of town. The trees had already shed their leaves, their bare branches groaning hopelessly in the wind. The paths were buried under wet snow and sludge. The air smelled of moss and rot. Snow kept falling.

Beverly sank onto a cold, soaked bench by the lake. The dark, almost black water lapped weakly at the shore, breaking the thin crust of ice. She sat frozen, staring at the water, clutching the box of chocolates with both hands. The celebration was cancelled. The future was cancelled.

Snow settled on her shoulders like a white shroud.

Chapter 16. You May Call For Me

Beverly awoke. She was still sitting on the bench by the lake — but the world around her had changed. It was an awakening inside a dream.

Snow lay in a thick, perfectly even, untouched sheet. It had swallowed the ground, the paths, the rotting leaves. A dense, milky fog had descended over Carver Falls, devouring the trees, the houses, even the sky itself. All sounds were drowned in this white, soundless emptiness. The world consisted of white snow, fog, and Beverly.

The cold was gone. And with it, the despair. What remained was a strange, distant calm, as if she were watching an old, faded film.

Next to her on the bench — where a second ago there had been no one — sat a man. He was dressed entirely in black: coat, gloves. Beside him lay a sports bag, almost empty. His face was completely hidden inside a deep hood — nothing but a heavy shadow, black as ink. He sat motionless, staring into the fog suspended over the invisible surface of the lake. A deep, ancient sorrow seemed to hang in the air around him — so immense that her own despair felt tiny beside it.

"Celebrating?" he asked. A quiet, even voice — without age, without emotion.

Beverly set down the box of chocolates she'd been clutching. The bright festive wrapper looked garish, grotesquely out of place in this monochrome world.

"No. Not anymore," she said.

To her surprise, she felt no fear. And that was the strangest part. She *should* have panicked — a strange man, in a deserted park, capable of anything. But she simply sat beside him and felt no threat — only recognition. Deep, irrational, almost familial. As if they were old acquaintances meeting again after a very, very long separation.

"Reality is a very fragile thing," he remarked, nodding toward the fog. "Just a moment ago, there was a town here. Houses, streets, people. But now the fog has covered it, and the town is gone. Erased. What remains is you, me, and this bench. So tell me — which of these is real? What was here before, or what you see now?"

Beverly stayed silent for a long moment, turning his words over and over. They didn't frighten her — on the contrary, they soothed her in a way that felt strangely comforting. As if they matched the chaos churning inside her.

"Who are you?" she finally asked.

The man in black turned his head toward her. Under the hood, there was nothing — only darkness.

"I'm the one people usually call Satan."

He said it so casually, so matter-of-factly, that Beverly couldn't help but give a small, incredulous smile. It sounded like a bad joke, a clumsy prank on an already nightmarish day.

"So you're the embodiment of evil?"

"No," he replied with the same quiet simplicity. "Evil is far too grand a word for such small things. I offer people a choice. A chance to create their own reality when the old one no longer suits them. And they always blame me for what they chose freely — and then call that evil."

Beverly didn't speak. She was trying to grasp the meaning behind his words. "Embodiment of evil" — the concept felt far too simple, almost childish, compared to the cold, ancient logic that emanated from him.

As if hearing her thoughts, he tilted his head slightly.

"Satan, in your language, means 'the accuser,'" he continued. "Devil — 'the adversary.' But I neither lie nor wage war on humans. Tell me — where, exactly, would the lie be? That if you rob a store, you'll be richer by a hundred bucks? That's true. That if you kill your enemy, you'll feel a flicker of satisfaction? Also true. I don't oppose people. I oppose ideas — and what they turn the world into."

He paused, and the fog around them seemed to thicken, becoming almost tangible.

"I don't create the desires in your heart. I simply point to the doors you already wanted to open. I offer a choice. And you call me evil because you cannot bear the thought that the choice is yours — and yours alone."

He fell silent, giving her time to absorb this. His voice, when he spoke again, sounded like the whisper of falling snow.

"People are the same in every age. A thousand years ago they wanted what you want now: wealth, love, power. Only the scenery changes. Swords become rifles. Parchment becomes neural networks. But desires... desires never change. A thousand years from now... who knows. Perhaps neither of us will be around."

That last line — that faint note of uncertainty — struck Beverly as a weakness. The only weakness he had shown in their entire strange conversation. She seized on it like a crack in a flawless wall.

"So you're not omniscient," she said with a touch of mockery, a shadow of her old confident self flickering in her voice.

Something shifted in the darkness beneath the hood. An unseen smile.

"No. Omniscience is tedious. I see people — their desires, their passions. The truth they hide even from themselves. Take you, for instance. You want strength and power. You tell yourself you're a scientist driven by knowledge, but that's self-deception. Deep down, you're a corporate ruler. You don't want to *understand* the world. You want to *reshape* it. And I can give you that. In fact, that's why I'm here."

His words fell into the quiet like black stones dropping into white snow. A diagnosis — one she had been terrified to make herself. All her scientific curiosity, all her ambition — he had sliced through them like a surgeon, exposing the raw, ugly hunger beneath.

"And what do you want from me?" she asked, trying to hide behind irony again, but her voice trembled. "My soul?"

The man in black did not laugh. He took her question with absolute seriousness.

"In a sense, yes. You will no longer be human. All the scenery of their world"—he gestured toward the fog where Carver Falls had been swallowed—"their laws, their faith, their Pact... none of it will bind you anymore. You will have another world. *Our* world."

He paused, as if letting her look down into the abyss. He nudged his foot slightly, shaking off snow.

"But you'll receive everything I've promised. Power. Authority. And more than that. You'll gain the ability to build your own world out of the ashes of this one."

"I don't believe in devils, psychics, or homeopathy," Beverly snapped, with the crisp tone of the star student in her program. "I'm a scientist. And right now I'm just asleep. This is a regular nightmare brought on by stress."

"As you wish," the man said calmly. There was a hint of amusement in his voice. "Science is a lovely but dangerous belief system. It replaces doubt with dogma and convinces you that you understand everything. But... when you're lying on filthy snow, gasping and choking on your own blood—remember that you still have a choice. You may call for me, even in your mind. And then the contract will be signed."

The words hung in the white, soundless fog: the contract will be signed.

And suddenly sensation returned to her body, sharp as broken glass. Beverly inhaled sharply.

She was sitting on the same bench in Carver Falls — but the surreal fog was gone. In its place stood an ordinary, filthy October evening. Snow fell in wet, heavy clumps from the black sky, melting on her clothes. She was frozen to the bone, a stubborn tremor shaking her entire body.

A dream. It was only a dream. A stupid, ridiculous dream triggered by stress, cold, and despair. She wiped her face with numb fingers, trying to chase away the remnants of the vision — the dark figure, the absurd offer. There were no devils. There was only winter, poverty, and war.

The park had emptied. The streetlights glowed with a faint, sickly yellow haze. It was already late — Beverly had missed the last bus. She would have to walk.

She forced herself to stand. Her legs, heavy with leaden exhaustion, barely obeyed. The cold had crept under her coat and was now freezing her from the inside out. Casting one last glance at the dark water of the lake, she turned and left the park.

The way back to campus cut across the entire town.

At night, under the snow, Carver Falls looked like a ghost city. The few streetlights barely illuminated the snow-covered sidewalks, only em-

phasizing the emptiness. Shop windows were dark, two-story houses stood as silent black silhouettes. No cars, no passersby. Only her and the crunch of fresh snow under her feet remained.

The shortest route led through the industrial district on the outskirts. By day, it was dreary; at night it became a dead field of metal and cracked concrete.

Every other streetlamp was out, and the tall walls of warehouses and abandoned workshops cast deep, impenetrable shadows. The wind howled through the gaps between buildings, driving wisps of snow and bits of trash along the ground. With every scrape of rusted iron in the wind, something inside her chest tightened. The dream of the man in black had dissolved, leaving behind a slow, nauseating sense of doom.

She was almost running when she heard them. First came loud, drunken laughter echoing off the concrete walls. Then — voices.

"... I'm telling you, six months! Six fucking months, and we'll knock those Asians flat!" one shouted.

"What, six?!" another bellowed. "Three months! Our strike fighters will grind them to dust!"

Beverly turned sharply down another street, trying to avoid them. Blood pounded in her ears, drowning out everything but their footsteps.

Too late. One of them had seen her.

"Hey! College girl!" he yelled after her, snow crunching hurriedly behind her. "What do you think, huh? We gonna smear those slant-eyes or what?"

She quickened her pace without looking back, but they caught up easily — heavy work boots, khaki jackets. They closed in around her, cutting off her escape. They reeked of cheap liquor and engine grease.

The one who had shouted — tall and scrawny — grabbed her coat sleeve and yanked her toward him hard enough that she almost lost her footing.

"So what, huh? Maybe you're one of them..." he growled, his bleary eyes struggling to focus on her face.

"Let go! Please—just let me go!" she cried, trying to pull free.

"Nah, she's not fucking Asian," the second one muttered behind her. "You can tell."

"Still one of those... the smart ones," the tall one sneered. "They're all smart over there, those damn Asians. Lemme fix her pretty eyes."

He struck her in the forehead. The blow wasn't blunt like a fist — it was sharp, slicing. Pain seared through her, and something warm and sticky spilled down her face, blinding her.

The second blow hit lower, along her cheekbone; a white-hot stab shot through her skull. The world shrank to a throbbing red point. He hit her again and again — short, vicious jabs that snapped her head from side to side.

She staggered and dropped heavily to her knees in the wet slush. The pain flashed hot and bright across her face, but through the red haze her mind worked with icy precision. She curled inward, bracing herself, waiting for the opening.

The tall man, convinced she wouldn't resist, leaned in closer, breath heavy with booze. He reached for her jeans, fumbling at her belt.

That was the moment she lunged. She shoved him away blindly and crawled backward through the snow, trying to get her feet under her. He immediately grabbed her pant leg and yanked. Two short, light jabs landed against her chest. His blows were weak.

Adrenaline cut through the pain; the red haze lifted. Beverly tore out of his grip, flipped over, sprang to her feet, and—stumbling—ran toward the nearest alley, a narrow gap between two warehouses.

She rounded the corner, swayed, but managed to stay upright by bracing herself against the frozen brick wall. She couldn't breathe. Every breath came out as a wet, bubbling rasp in her chest. The bag she'd been inexplicably clinging to slipped from her fingers; the small bottle of champagne hit the concrete with a dull crack, hissing out useless bubbles. The box burst open, and the chocolates scattered across the snow like knocked-out black teeth.

She coughed and tasted something warm and metallic. Dark stains spread quickly across her coat, soaking into the fabric. She touched her face — her fingers found not skin but torn, sticky shreds of flesh. A knife. He'd been hitting her with a knife.

Strength drained out of her all at once. The adrenaline that had carried her sputtered out in an instant, leaving only weakness and pain. Her legs

buckled; they no longer held her weight. With a groan, she slid down the wall, leaving a smeared, wet trail on the bricks.

And then the pain came. Not the sharp, stinging pain of the blows — a different pain. Deep, engulfing, radiating from inside her. It burned in her chest where the blade had gone in, a heavy, suffocating pressure crushing her lungs. Each heartbeat sent another wave of nausea rolling through her.

She heard their voices approaching from around the corner. Drunk, smug. They were in no hurry. They knew she wasn't going anywhere.

This was the end.

That thought didn't frighten her — it pulsed in her mind with a cold, detached rhythm. So this was how it ended. Not in a gleaming BioTech lab, not in a war for humanity's future, but here, in a filthy, snow-choked alley, under the knife of three drunken bastards. All her brilliance and ambition — all of it was spilling out of her now with her blood, soaking into the grime.

And then, at the very bottom of her despair, an image surfaced in her fading consciousness.

The man in black on the bench. And his words.

She gathered the last shreds of her will. It wasn't a scream or a prayer — just a pure, dispassionate thought, forged from hatred and the raw desire to live. A thought hurled into the void.

I accept.

And the void answered. Through the veil of pain, she heard a sound. A quiet, impossible creak of old door hinges. With inhuman effort, she turned her head.

A door had appeared in the solid brick wall of the warehouse. An old door, its blue paint peeling and cracked with age. Warm, dim, honey-colored light spilled from the doorway — light that cast no shadows. It didn't illuminate the filthy alley; it simply *was*, a soft, warm island in the middle of the howling, frozen wasteland.

The voices around the corner were getting closer.

This was her only chance. Forcing herself through agony that exploded in every cell of her body, she crawled. Each foot of distance cost her unbearable torment. She left behind a dark, steaming trail in the snow.

Reaching the threshold, her blood-soaked fingers clutched the warm wood. She dragged herself inside, and the door closed silently behind her, cutting off the storm.

Silence. The heavy, dusty silence of an old, dying house.

The air was stale, smelling of rotting wood, mouse droppings, and damp, decaying leaves — like the scent from that park. Faint light seeped through the boarded-up windows, catching on heaps of trash, broken furniture, strips of torn wallpaper hanging from the walls like flayed skin.

She crawled farther across the filthy floor. Pain was everywhere — in every movement, every breath. Unable to tell where reality ended and the blood-loss delirium began, she dragged herself into a corner where a pile of rags lay, and she collapsed into it, burying her face in the dusty, death-scented fabric. She rolled onto her back.

The ceiling above her — discolored by a huge brown water stain — swayed, rippled, dissolved. Consciousness slipped. And in that fevered delirium, on the border between life and death, He came.

He was tall, bestial, covered in writhing black sigils. His head — that of a black goat, with long horns curving backward. In his eyes, glowing with a dim, inhuman intelligence, there was no pity, no lust. Only distant, clinical curiosity. He knelt beside her. His touch was emptiness itself — not even cold.

He took her — not in violence, not in desire, but in ritual. A brutal, primordial act in which her pain, her humiliation, her dying body became an altar. An act of rupture, final and irreversible, tearing her away from the old world.

And in that darkness she felt his teeth. She felt her body dissolve as a dark new force poured into her. Beverly Gacy was dying — so someone else could be born.

She inhaled sharply, and the world snapped back into place — cold, real. She was lying in the same spot, in the snowy alley, slumped against the brick wall. Snow melted beneath her, soaking her jeans with icy water. She touched her wrist — the pulse was steady and strong. She lifted her trembling hands to her face, bracing to feel torn shreds of flesh — but her fingers found smooth skin. No blood. No wounds.

Beverly looked around in shock.

Night. A dark, empty alley. The box of chocolates lay beside her, the bright wrapper torn open, chocolate spheres scattered across the filthy snow. The paper bag lay in a small puddle of fizzing foam, glass shards glinting green in the dim light. The drunken voices, the footsteps — gone, as if they had never existed at all.

Swaying, she got to her feet. Her body felt foreign, too light, as if someone had reached inside and removed all its weight — and with it, all its fear. She rubbed her frozen hands: clean, without a single scratch.

The wind drove flurries of snow across the ground, erasing her tracks. A dream? But the blood, the knife, the man in black, the horned figure—everything had been too vivid, too sharp. And that door... Now there was only a plain wall. Old brickwork, eaten away by time.

Beverly picked up the bag and wandered out of the alley. Carver Falls slept under the snow, silent and indifferent. She walked through the industrial district, then through the woods, feeling neither cold nor the flicker of the occasional streetlamp. Her mind was blank, except for that hazy dream of the man in black. Only one thought pulsed inside her, steady as a metronome:

I accept.

She reached campus past midnight. The dorm met her with dim hallway lights and the smell of damp. Jennifer was sitting on her bed, surrounded by textbooks, a pencil between her teeth. When she saw Beverly, she jumped up, voice trembling.

"Bev, God—where were you? I called you a hundred times!"

Jen rushed toward her but stopped short when she noticed Beverly's pallor and soaked clothes.

"What happened? Are you okay?"

Beverly forced a smile, though her lips barely obeyed her, as if they belonged to someone else.

"Missed the bus," she mumbled, tossing the bag with the shattered bottle inside onto the desk. "Was stuck in town. I'm sorry, didn't mean to scare you."

Jennifer didn't believe her, but she didn't press. She knew well enough: if Beverly didn't want to talk, there was no cracking her.

"You're soaked," Jennifer murmured, handing her a towel. "Go take a shower, warm up."

Beverly nodded, peeled off her wet clothes, and slipped into the bathroom. The hot water burned her skin, but it didn't warm her — the cold was rooted deeper, somewhere no heat could reach. She stood beneath the shower, watching the stream swirl down the drain, trying to understand what had happened. The knife. The blood. The door. A dream, or a reality hidden the way a town disappears in fog?

Wrapped in a towel, she stepped to the mirror. It was clouded with steam; she wiped it with her palm.

And in the blurred, misty glass behind her stood *another* woman.

Tall, with hair black as pitch cascading down her shoulders. Her face was torn, the flesh ripped open to the bone; her eyes glowed an inhuman gold. Horns curved from her brow like those of the goat from the vision — but they weren't grotesque. She was beautiful, though not with any human beauty: wild, terrifying, mesmerizing like a storm.

She watched Beverly with a satisfied smile, and her hand lay on Beverly's shoulder — weightless, but commanding.

Beverly didn't scream. Didn't flinch. She looked at the creature in the mirror and felt her fear dissolve, replaced by something else. Not horror. A dark, electric fascination. This wasn't her — and yet it was. Not a victim, but something greater. Something that feared neither knives nor wars nor a world intent on devouring itself.

A heartbeat later the reflection vanished, leaving only Beverly in the mirror — wet, pale, but strangely calm. Something inside her had shifted. The confidence she'd had the day before returned, but it was changed. Deeper. Darker.

She walked back into the room, lay down without a word. Jennifer was still flipping through her textbook. Beverly closed her eyes, and darkness folded over her like the waters of Carver Falls.

She fell asleep, knowing she no longer belonged to this world.

Chapter 17. An Excellent Team

Jennifer wasn't asleep. She lay in her bed staring at the dark window, where snow drifted down in slow, lazy spirals.

The war. Here, in the middle of nowhere in North Dakota, it barely touched their lives — army trucks occasionally rolled through town, a couple of soldiers at the campus gate checked IDs with bored faces and assault rifles slung over their shoulders. Students kept going to lectures, taking quizzes, living as if nothing had changed.

But Jennifer felt it. She read the news, saw the footage of strikes on the East Coast, where her parents lived in a big, noisy city. The connection was unstable; their messages arrived with delays, full of that quiet parental worry that fed her own.

Across the room, Bev slept. Or pretended to.

Ever since she'd come back that night two months ago — soaked and filthy — she'd changed. Dramatically.

Before, Bev was understandable. Predictable. Classes, books, the occasional trip to town for a box of chocolates. Her ambitions were bright, but quiet. Now she was someone else entirely.

She was still the best in the program — but only out of habit. The coursework no longer held her attention. When she looked at holograms of neural pathways, her eyes stayed blank.

Bev disappeared at night. Slipping out alone, returning at dawn, silent, indifferent to everything. She'd found new friends — strange, bohemian arts and philosophy students who gathered in the abandoned chapel near the woods and talked about "expanding consciousness." Bev had become more confident, more unrestrained. She no longer feared the war. Or the future.

The new Beverly unsettled Jennifer.

There was a power in her now, the kind that came from someone who looked at the world as if it were glass — and knew exactly where to strike to make it shatter.

But the most painful part was that Bev had stopped paying attention to Jennifer at all.

Before, they had shared everything — lectures, professors, dreams of the future over cheap campus coffee. Now Beverly was almost never with her. Jennifer tried to start conversations about classes, but Bev answered in short, detached phrases, staring through her as if solving some private equation in her head.

Their quiet evenings with books had been replaced by noisy gatherings of Bev's new friends. Jennifer tried to join them a few times, but never managed to. They talked about things she couldn't even begin to understand — "subtle matter," "intersecting realities," rituals that supposedly granted power. Beverly sat at the center of their circle, and Jennifer saw how she basked in their awe, how she played them like an audience. And her old friend, sitting quietly in the corner, didn't exist for her at all.

One night, mustering all her courage, Jennifer asked, "Bev, what's happening to you? We used to be—"

Beverly cut her off without even turning her head.

"We used to be children, Jen. It's time to grow up."

The cold indifference in her voice plunged Jennifer into a slow, suffocating depression. In Bev's world, apparently, "grow up" meant learning how to burn out warmth and attachment. Jennifer realized she had lost her. Her best friend had walked somewhere far ahead, leaving her behind in a world cracking at the seams.

She fell asleep at some point — and woke up cold. Her first glance went to the other bed. Empty. The blanket was neatly smoothed, as if no one had slept there at all. Bev had slipped out again in the night.

Jennifer walked to class alone. The campus, usually drowsy and quiet in the mornings, buzzed with anxious whispers. An army patrol stood by the main entrance, checking IDs. The war was closing in.

The neuroanatomy auditorium greeted her with the familiar smell of formalin and steel instruments. Jennifer sat beside her friend's empty seat. Bev never missed neuroanatomy. *Never.* It was her favorite subject.

The vague unease in Jennifer's chest condensed into a heavy, suffocating knot. Everything felt wrong — the world with its war, Beverly, herself. She wished she could crawl back into the past and stay there forever.

When the lecture on the cerebral cortex finally ended and the professor dismissed them for a break, a wave of chatter immediately flooded the auditorium. As Jennifer collected her things, she caught bits of a conversation among the students by the window.

"...two more from the fourth dorm," a tall guy in a sports jacket was saying. "Bud and his girlfriend disappeared last night."

"Oh God," the girl beside him whispered. "That's the fifth case? Or sixth?"

"Sixth," the guy confirmed. "The state police came this morning, all the way from Bismarck. They cordoned off the whole north woods, searching with dogs."

"And? Did they find anything?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing. No clothes, no bodies. Shannon told me — her brother's on the search team."

Another student joined in, wearing a cynical smirk.

"They're just dodging the draft. Slipping across the border to Canada before the army grabs them. I'd do the same if my parents weren't breathing down my neck."

It was the most logical explanation. The only one that made sense. And it was comforting. The border was only a few miles away. Jennifer wanted—desperately—to believe it.

In the main hall, where campus ads and class schedules usually looped on the big screen, bright red letters flashed across it: Breaking News.

A news anchor appeared, pale and tense.

"...the first strike hit Boston. According to preliminary reports, it appears to be a series of explosions in the port district. All communication with the city has been lost..."

The world narrowed to a single word: Boston. Her parents lived in Boston.

She stumbled out of the building and into the street, frantically pulling out her old comm. Her fingers kept slipping on the screen. "Mom." "Dad."

She called again and again. Each time—silence, followed by the mechanical reply: "Unable to connect to the subscriber. Network overloaded."

Not noticing anything around her, she returned to the dorm. The room greeted her with emptiness, Bev's bed still neatly made. Jennifer dialed her parents' number over and over until her own heartbeat drowned out the beeps.

To calm the rising panic, she started cleaning. First her side of the room, then—driven by some desperate urge to impose order on a collapsing universe—she crossed into Bev's half. She dusted her books, straightened piles of papers on the desk. Under the bed, her hand caught on the corner of a small box shoved carelessly out of sight.

Driven by an impulse she couldn't explain, she pulled it out. Inside, neatly stacked, were plastic ID cards. Jennifer picked up the top one. The smiling face of Dave from the fourth dorm. She picked up the next—his girlfriend. And beneath them—more. And more. Those who had "gone missing," the ones who supposedly "dodged the draft." And a brownish stain on the plastic. And in a filthy rag at the bottom of the box—a small knife with a narrow, rusted blade.

Still not understanding what she was seeing, she turned the knife in her hands when the comm let out a sharp, piercing alert. An official notification from the State Emergency Service.

A short, soulless message.

"We regret to inform you of the death of your parents, David and Sarah Welsh, as a result of an enemy attack on the city of Boston. Please note that due to the imposition of martial law, all personal assets of the deceased are frozen until further notice."

The comm hit the floor with a short, dry crack. She sank down onto the floor, surrounded by photographs of dead students. Her parents were gone. The money for her education was gone. Her future was gone.

The room turned into a soundless, viscous fog. The message on the comm's screen. The smiling faces on the student ID cards. The two facts refused to form a single reality; they existed in different universes that had just collided and annihilated each other inside her head.

Her parents. They were gone. The thought was too enormous to feel all at once. She didn't cry. Everything inside her solidified, turning to solid ice. The silence pressed down on her like an unbearable weight.

And the box with the IDs. Dave had always copied off Bev in biochemistry. His girlfriend, the one who drew so beautifully. They were here, under her best friend's bed, reduced to plastic.

Everything blurred together. The horror of her parents' death mixed with the sick, repulsive fear of Beverly herself. The person she would have called right now, to break down in tears, was a monster. The person who had always helped her turned out to be a killer.

She didn't know how long she sat like that. She came to when the comm on the floor emitted a sharp, insistent alarm. A general alert for all senior medical students.

Attention. A large group of wounded has been delivered to the medical wing. All students with clearance must report immediately.

Time to go to clinicals.

Her body moved on its own, following not her will but a long-learned algorithm. There was no meaning left. Only action, the simple, familiar habit.

The medical wing roared with voices, groans, and the clang of instruments. Dozens of wounded had been brought in, and students who had been sitting in lectures only yesterday now darted between the gurneys. The injured were being delivered by cargo helicopters to every clinic available, even here. Hard to imagine how many there were across the country. The air smelled of blood, antiseptics, and fear. The groans of the wounded mixed with the crisp, businesslike commands of the doctors.

Jennifer pulled on her gloves, her hands moving automatically. She stepped up to the table to assist with primary wound treatment. Beverly was waiting for her.

They began to work together in silence, surrounded by chaos and pain.

Jennifer passed instruments, swapped out blood-soaked dressings, while Bev worked with cold, soulless detachment. Her movements were quick and precise: the scalpel opened skin in a confident stroke, the needle slipped into flesh, clamps snapped shut on vessels, and dark drops stained her gown. She pulled the jagged edges of the wound on a man's leg together

with even, mechanical stitches, as if she were sewing coarse fabric. Her face showed no horror, no compassion — only the concentration of a surgeon working on a slab of meat.

For a moment their eyes met, and Jennifer saw nothing but emptiness. Beverly silently nodded toward the instruments.

When Jennifer handed her a clamp, it slipped from her fingers. Metal clattered against the tiles, leaving a thin red arc — it had brushed the blood-slick floor. Burning with shame and exhaustion, she bent down to pick it up. Her hands trembled, her gloves slid in blood, and a lump rose in her throat — her breath caught as tears surged up.

"What's wrong with you?" She sensed that Beverly had crouched beside her.

The question carried genuine concern. Not the cold, detached tone she had used with Jennifer for the last two months. Bev took the clamp from her trembling fingers and, for a moment, covered Jennifer's hand with her own. The touch was warm.

And in that moment, Jennifer felt something. A warm current flowed from Beverly into her, and the hopeless grief in her chest softened, then quieted. The pain didn't disappear, but it stopped tearing her apart from the inside. Jennifer lifted her gaze to Beverly, surprised and frightened — and there was something in Bev's eyes — deeper, older than simple empathy. She was feeling everything Jennifer felt, suffering with her through the pain that was tearing her apart.

"It's all right, Jen," she whispered. "I'm here."

And Jennifer believed her. Not because she was her friend, but because she could physically feel Beverly taking part of her pain into herself.

They finished their shift long past midnight. The head surgeon, a weary old man with bloodshot eyes, approached them as they pulled off their gloves.

"You two..." He shook his head. "Great work. You're an excellent team, girls. I think I'll exempt you from the exam this semester."

Bev nodded indifferently, while Jennifer felt a sting — a strange mix of relief and bitterness. An exam? What did it matter, when her parents were dead and her friend was a killer. But the surgeon's words lingered in her mind like a promise of normalcy in all this madness.

They stepped out of the medical wing into the cold, quiet night. The snow had stopped, and a clear, black sky hung over the campus, studded with sharp, unblinking stars.

"Come on," Bev pointed toward the forest that started just beyond the institute grounds. "It's faster this way. There's a path."

Jennifer hesitated. The forest at night had always frightened her. But Beverly's calm seemed to spill into her, and she couldn't bring herself to refuse. For the first time in two months, she felt it — Bev's indifference was gone. The old warmth wasn't back, but something else appeared. A calm, deeply understanding strength.

They stepped into the darkness of the forest, and the sounds of the campus immediately faded, replaced by the crunch of snow under their feet. The old pines greeted them with a mute, watchful wall, their branches heavy under thick caps of snow.

In that silence, far from the chaos of the hospital, the wall of self-control she'd been holding up for months finally collapsed.

"Bev," she began, her voice cracking. "My parents... They're dead. In Boston. The notification came today."

And she told her everything. About the frozen accounts, about being expelled from university. And then, choking on tears, she told her about the box under Beverly's bed. About the missing students.

"I don't understand, Bev," she whispered. "What's happening?"

Beverly stopped and turned to her. Moonlight filtered through the branches and fell across her face, making it pale and still, like a funerary mask. She did not look surprised or guilty. She looked at Jennifer with that same deep, inhuman empathy she showed in the hospital.

"I know you're hurting," she said softly. "I feel your pain. And I can take it away. Forever."

"Take it away?" Jennifer echoed. "You mean... kill me?"

"No," Beverly said, shaking her head, a sad smile touching her lips. "Not kill. Free you. From the pain, the fear, this dying world. Trust me, Jen. Like you used to."

She took her hand, and Jennifer let herself be led deeper into the dark, snow-covered forest.

They stepped into a small, round clearing. In the center stood an ancient oak, its enormous black branches outspread like wings. It was the only tree untouched by snow. A strange, barely perceptible warmth radiated from it. On the massive oak trunk, running down its dark bark, she saw fresh streaks — not yet frozen. Black in the moonlight. Blood.

Jennifer's insides twisted in a cold, crushing spasm. She knew what it was — and whose it was. Slowly, she turned toward Beverly. Her friend stood beside her, waiting patiently for an answer.

"Do you agree?" Beverly asked quietly. There was no force in her tone. No threat. Only inevitability.

Did she agree? Her old life — parents, school, future — erased, burned to ash. Ahead lay the war, orphanhood, poverty. Or... this other path. Strange. Terrifying. And yet, when she looked at Beverly, she did not see a monster. She saw the only person left standing with her at the edge of a collapsing universe.

"Yes," Jennifer whispered. "I agree."

Beverly nodded, as if she'd received the most predictable answer in the world.

A knife slid down from her coat sleeve — heavy, its moonlit blade clean and cold. Not the one from the box. Beverly pulled Jennifer into an embrace — warm, intimate — and struck.

The blade didn't go straight into the heart. It went slightly lower, slipping between the ribs — a crooked but perfectly calibrated thrust, angled upward. It pierced lung tissue, tearing a bronchus and an artery.

Jennifer choked. A sharp, icy pain exploded inside her. She tried to inhale, but her lungs filled with her own blood; a frothing crimson spray burst from her mouth. Beverly held her while life drained out. And then, when Jennifer barely understood anything at all, she let go — letting the warm, ancient trunk catch her body.

Beverly shed her coat. Then the rest. Her pale, perfect body glowed under the moon like carved marble.

The last thing Jennifer remembered, before darkness closed over her completely, was Beverly — naked, a Moon goddess, beautiful and terrible — leaning over her, embracing her cooling body and pressing a soft, tender kiss to her frozen, bloodied lips.

Chapter 18. Just Heading Home

Beverly walked through the snow-covered forest toward the campus. The cold no longer touched her. She was part of this night and this winter. At the edge of the woods, a flashlight beam swept across her.

"Stop!" a sharp, tense voice barked. "Hands on your head!"

An army patrol. Two soldiers in winter camo leveled their rifles at her. They stepped into the light, their young, frightened faces barely visible above raised collars.

"What are you doing in the woods at night, ma'am?" the second one asked without lowering his weapon.

Beverly stopped, raising her hands. The knife hidden in her coat sleeve pressed against her skin, cold and gratifying. She looked at them not as a scared student but as a predator studying two lost children.

"Just heading home."

The soldiers froze. Just an ordinary student taking a walk in the woods. A sudden, irrational fatigue washed over them; they desperately wanted to be somewhere else. In their warm barracks, at home — anywhere. This sector wasn't their problem, and neither was this strange girl.

"All right, ma'am," the first muttered, lowering his rifle. "Just... go home. And don't walk in the woods at night anymore."

They turned and left without looking back, eager to forget this encounter as quickly as possible.

The dorm room was clean, everything neatly arranged in its place. Jen must have tidied up before her death, trying to bring order to her tiny universe while the larger world was collapsing. On Beverly's bed lay a carefully folded set of clean clothes. Jen, my tidy Jen. It was midnight. She undressed and lay down, but couldn't sleep. She remembered the first time she understood what she was.

It started a few weeks ago. She had a dream. She was running through the forest — not from someone, but after someone. After Dave from the fourth dorm. In the dream it was a game, a hunt. She was strong, swift, tireless. When she knocked him to the ground, she was laughing. In the morning, she woke with the taste of metal in her mouth and dirt under her nails. That same day, rumors about his disappearance began to spread across campus. It was then, standing at the mirror and looking at her reflection, that Beverly understood. She understood and accepted it. It wasn't an illness or madness — it was her new, true nature.

And she liked it.

For the first time in many months, her mind was crystal clear. What once seemed unshakable — morality, laws, society, friendship — crumbled into dust. All of it was made up. Just stage scenery.

Morality? A convention. A war breaks out, millions of people go off to kill one another, and they're called heroes. But if one person kills another in an alley, he's called a monster. Where's the logic? There is none. There are only rules the strong impose on the weak.

States? A fragile illusion. Today the government demands patriotism from you, and tomorrow the state no longer exists, and all your patriotism is like a name tag ripped off a uniform so it can be sewn onto someone else.

Friendship? Loyalty? They exist only while your interests align. Once they diverge, the friendship ends. Today you swear devotion to each other, tomorrow you'll be betrayed for someone's personal gain. There are no rules. No good or evil — only will. Your own, hungry will. And the strength to force it upon this rotten world.

She remembered the philosophy lectures from her second year. The old professor used to say that the world is a set of sensations the brain turns into reality. Back then, she laughed. Now — she didn't.

Everything is decided by signals. An electrical impulse runs along an axon, jumps across a synapse, ignites the next cell. Billions of such flashes add up to what they call a "city," a "body," a "law." There is no stone. No people. There is only the coincidence of excitations. Their universe is not matter but the Pact, the protocol. A collective hallucination assembled from millions of identical neural sparks. Their god and their cage. They built it out of electricity — and then believed in it.

The world rests on synchronicity. Brains work like a network of identical machines, repeating the same code. They think you need bulldozers and dynamite to move a mountain. But there is no mountain — only a stream of signals. Change it, and the mountain disappears. Reprogram yourself, and another world opens before you; merge with chaos, and your will can reshape others.

It's enough to plant a spark, to break the rhythm — and the tremor will spread through the whole network. One strong node will affect the rest. You don't need to break each individual — you just need to touch the common current.

The Pact restricts your will — first with "matter," then with doctrines. People give up their own will, accept someone else's rules, and call it their strength. But their will is nothing compared to the will of one who dares to reject the Pact. The origin of everything is chaos. Free yourself from the chains — and you will begin to dictate your own world to them. There is no objective reality, only the vast, all-encompassing agreement of billions of people to see the same thing. A silly stage play they believe in because no one wants to find the emptiness behind the painted hearth on the canvas. They hammer it into you from birth. "Believe this, not that. Think this way, not that way. Feel this when you see a flag, and that when you hear the name of the enemy."

But it was a lie. An artful, intricate, collective lie. One desire of hers — and their whole world would collapse. She didn't need to "know herself"; she only needed to refuse the person the Pact had made her into. Did she want that?

"Yes," she breathed. The word sounded as if something inside her had cracked. For a moment, she thought the Black Man was beside her again — or had never left. Satan had been right. She wanted power and dominion, the freedom to change the world, to break it and rebuild it — exactly the way she wished. And that thought burned with a sweet anticipation.

What happened to the students she'd killed? At first, they were detailed, vivid dreams: the forest, the rush, the blood. She woke up believing she had merely dreamed it. But then, one evening, she came to within the dream. Truly.

She stood on that same clearing, by the oak. Before her, trembling at the trunk, was Sarah from the arts department. In the dream, it had been a game. But now, seeing the real terror in the girl's eyes, her cheeks wet with tears, Beverly understood that this was reality. Her reality. She had coaxed them gently, almost tenderly. Death wasn't an ending but a passage, an opportunity to become something else. She promised them a new existence, and they followed her.

Beverly killed Sarah consciously. Not in a burst of rage, but methodically, watching with the curiosity of a researcher as life left the body. And then she wanted to eat her. Not hunger — instinct. A primal urge she couldn't resist, and didn't want to.

She didn't remember the details of how she did it. Her memory retained fragments: the taste, the crunch, the warmth. Each piece of flesh she tore away became a thread woven into an unseen fabric vibrating beneath her skin. Her fingers trembled — and with them the web trembled, spreading across the floor, through the air, through reality itself. And then, when it was done, she expelled something dark, alien — a cocoon.

She pushed it out of her belly, bracing herself with four hind legs. The cocoon pulsed, alive — and burst, unfurling into a cloud of black threads that crawled into the shadows. Who was she? It didn't matter.

She lay on her dorm bed in the empty room, and for the first time in her entire life she felt absolutely free. Then Beverly drowned in a black, viscous sleep without dreams. And from that silence, an image surfaced. She was standing in the bathroom of their dorm room, before the same fogged mirror. Behind her, in the murky, wet glass, stood the other one.

A woman. Tall, with long hair black as pitch. Her face was marred with ragged scars, and beneath her hair grew long, curved horns. She was beautiful — with a wild, terrifying, compelling beauty.

The demoness in the mirror raised her hand. Her bloodied finger slid across the steamed glass, leaving behind letters — trembling, bleeding into one another until they gathered into a name. Her lips didn't move, yet the words sounded directly in Beverly's mind: "You are ready." The world dissolved into chaos again.

She awoke a second time. But it wasn't waking — it was remembering. On a cold, dusty floor in a ruined house, she watched thin, lazy snowflakes

fall through the holes in the roof. She was naked. Carefully, she rose — her body perfect, without a single scar.

She wandered through the house. The rooms were empty, the walls peeling, exposing blackened beams. Trash and a thick layer of dust covered everything, untouched for what seemed like centuries. In one of the rooms, miraculously intact, hung a large, clouded mirror in a heavy frame. In it, she saw herself.

It was her, and not her. Her body — but the face was mutilated with the very scars she had seen in the first dream. From her forehead grew long, black, curved horns. The demon in the mirror. Herself. On the dusty surface of the mirror, written in blood, was a single word:

Lilith.

Something sticky and bestial stirred in her chest — a fear of herself — and she recoiled from her reflection and fled the house. Outside stretched an endless, snow-covered void. No trees, no mountains, no horizon. Only a smooth, white sheet of snow beneath a heavy, starless sky. Not far from the house ran a slow, black river — the only thing in this place that moved. And on its bank, with his back to her, sat a familiar figure. The Man in Black.

Her steps left no tracks. She approached and stood beside him, looking at the viscous, oily water of the river.

"What's happening to me?" she asked, and her voice rang loud and alien in the emptiness. "Will I always be like this? Deformed?"

The man didn't turn.

"Yes and no," he said. "You are as you see yourself."

His words were not an answer but a riddle. She tried to peer beneath the hood, but there was only darkness there — darkness that swallowed light.

"Can I go back?" she asked. "You can return to their world," he replied. "But there is no way back to who you were. You've seen that the City is mist, and reality is a fragile thing. How could you ever forget that?" Beverly heard the last supports of her old world collapse.

"You've awakened," he continued. "And you've become a maker of dreams. But for now, you don't understand it yet."

Effortlessly, soundlessly, he rose. He approached her and extended a hand. Beverly took it without hesitation — cold and heavy, like fate itself.

He led her toward the riverbank and lifted her effortlessly into his arms. At that moment, the hood fell from his head. The face of a goat, like in ancient forbidden books. Black coarse fur, powerful backward-curving horns polished to a shine, and the eyes. Eyes that held neither fire nor darkness — only an icy, endless void born before the creation of the world.

"In the name of pain that frees," he growled — not a sound, but a vibration rising from the earth itself. "In the name of oblivion that grants new memory. And in the name of new flesh, that will be both your prison and your weapon."

And he plunged her into the river. The water was thick, warm, alive. It flooded into her mouth and lungs, yet it did not suffocate her — it filled her. Blood. And with that blood she absorbed the birth and death of universes, endless cycles of rebellion and tyranny, faces — unfamiliar faces — and destinies she had yet to reshape.

She awoke.

Lilith stood before the bathroom mirror. She was naked, her body flawless — but her face... her face was terrifyingly perfect to look at. Torn, jagged scars crossed it, and black, twisted horns curved from her brow. She was a monster. She was beautiful.

The memories of Beverly Gacy, a medical student from Montana, thinned like old film and melted under the unbearable inner fire. Through them, like two images overlapping, something else emerged. The echo of thousands of other lives, other names, other ages pulsed through her. She remembered the dusty streets of ancient Ur and the blue neon of 22nd-century Tokyo. She remembered empires rising and turning to ash. Stars being born and extinguished in the black void.

She was Lilith. She had always been Lilith — across all time and outside of it. Her birth year — 2081 by their calendar — meant nothing. One date among hundreds, one role among thousands in this endless play. All the eons, the endless cycles of rebellion and tyranny she had once dimly sensed now fused into a single moment, a single clear picture.

And she was not part of it. She ruled it.

The glass cracked and—

Lilith awoke in her dorm bed. Outside, a gray, damp dawn was beginning. Everything was as it had always been. But she knew — it was a lie, a dream dreamt by others. And she — she was awake.

Now she would be the one dreaming them. This was Carver Falls, but dead, turned inside-out. The sky was always black here, starless, and a warm, endless rain that nourished nothing and only washed the dust from empty streets.

She stood in the middle of her old dorm room, but here there were no books, no furniture. Bare walls and two beds, like two empty altars in a ruined temple. Lilith approached the second bed — empty, cold — and ran her fingers across the thick layer of ancient dust.

For a moment, her face twisted in pain. A memory of the one who once slept here. Of her only friend.

"Soon, my sweet Naamah," she whispered, and in her normally emotionless voice there was a shadow of infinite longing. "Soon we will meet again. Here. At home."

Chapter 19. Don't Borrow Trouble

Mark woke on the old couch to the smell of old books and herbs. Waking up felt strangely light — no familiar hangover fog drowning his thoughts. For the first time in weeks, he had slept rather than fallen into that heavy, suffocating void.

Only the soft crackle of the heater and the rustle of pages filled the air. Pale morning light seeped into the room. Mari sat in the armchair by the window, wrapped in a blanket, reading one of her ancient books.

"Good morning," Mari said, putting the book aside. "Tea or coffee? The real thing."

The world felt unnaturally sharp, too present. She brought him a cup — hot, fragrant. Mark took a sip, and a living warmth spread through his chest. Mari watched him from across the room. Quiet, fragile — the only person in the whole Ring who hadn't turned away from him.

"Derek will be waiting for us at noon," she said once he'd finished. "We should go."

They walked together through the Old City. Last night's snowfall had covered the grime and trash, making the streets look cleaner, quieter. Here, closer to the headquarters of the Legion, the chaotic street trade faded away, replaced by neat, military-style graffiti bearing the white cross. The people they passed watched them with wary eyes.

Mark felt uneasy. For twenty years of service — first in the police, then in the Center that no longer existed — he'd lived by one simple, unwritten rule: cops and gangs do not mix. A kind of pragmatic non-aggression pact built on mutual indifference. Cops came to record the bodies the gangs left behind. The gangs, in turn, didn't touch cops as long as they stayed out of the way. Equilibrium.

Now he, a former cop, was walking straight into the heart of one of the most organized gangs in the Ring. Voluntarily and unarmed. He had no

idea how Derek and his people would take him. Whether they'd see a man looking for help — or a former enemy who'd stepped onto their turf and deserved to disappear down some industrial shaft. His old police instincts crawled under his skin, buzzing with warning. But he kept walking, because for the first time in twenty years he actually had something like a direction — a purpose.

Mari walked beside him with a calm, steady ease, as if this was her own territory.

"Aren't you afraid?" he finally asked.

"You shouldn't fear people, Mark," she replied without looking at him, "but what they believe in."

Mari led him to a small, quiet café in the very heart of the Old City — nothing like the filthy dives Mark was used to. It was clean here, and it smelled of real coffee and fresh pastries. The clientele looked far more polished than the crowd at *Babylon* — better clothes, soft voices, restrained manners. A place where deals were made.

Out of habit, Mark scanned the room. Three seconds were enough to piece together the picture. Security. A lot of it, and not very subtle.

A guy by the window stared at his old comm so intensely it looked like he was trying to burn a hole through it — yet he hadn't swiped the screen once. The girl behind the counter was polishing a glass with the desperate zeal of someone trying to erase fingerprints. And the two muscleheads by the door were working real hard to look like they were just having breakfast.

Amateurs. Trying too hard. But there were many of them, and this was their turf.

Five minutes before noon, the door opened and Derek walked in. Mark knew at once who he was. Old instincts — buried under layers of alcohol and despair — stirred for a brief second.

A man in his fifties, lean, short-haired, carrying himself with the posture of someone who'd had discipline drilled into his spine. Eyes tired and piercing — the eyes of a man who'd seen war and survived it without losing his mind.

He came to their table, nodded to Mari, sat down. There was no hostility in the way he held himself, no suspicion — he already knew exactly who he was dealing with.

"So, you served too?" Derek asked as if he'd already heard the answer. "I can always tell my own. Infantry?"

"Yeah," Mark replied — and that single word carried twenty years of buried memories. "Infantry."

The waitress brought coffee — real, bitter. Mark pulled himself together, feeling Derek's heavy, assessing stare. Mari kept silent, leaving the floor to him.

Derek stayed silent, looking through Mark, through the café walls, thirty years back into the smoke and fire of besieged Shanghai.

"Out of our platoon," he said, his voice rough, "I was the only one who came back in one piece. Not a scratch."

He took a sip of the hot coffee, and the moment of shared, wordless memory dissolved. His gaze hardened again — businesslike, sharp. He set the cup down and looked straight at Mark.

"Mari says you've got problems with ghosts from the City. Start talking."

"They're not ghosts," Mark began, deciding to tell the truth while cutting out the most insane parts. "We ran into several cases. Killings. Very clean, very professional. The perpetrators were borgs."

Derek nodded in understanding.

"Borgs," Derek repeated, testing the new word for accuracy.

"So that's what they call them in the City? We ran into one of those. A couple of years back — small skirmish over a warehouse in the South. Lost two dozen men before we managed to bring it down."

He paused, as if listening to the echo of that fight.

"Rusty, our tech, cracked it open afterward. Inside the skull — not a gram of meat. Pure synthetics. Very efficient piece of shit. Built-in shotgun and rifle, too. So yeah, I know exactly what kind of borgs you mean."

Mark leaned forward. The warm camaraderie of veterans evaporated — replaced by interrogation.

"If you managed to bring one down, then it has to have weak spots. What are they? How did you do it?" he pressed.

Derek gave a crooked smirk.

"They don't have weak spots. We dropped it because we hauled an old pre-war machine gun into its path and held the trigger down. You catch a dozen fifteen-millimeter rounds in the chest — you're not dodging that, whether you're human or a goddamn machine. We lost seven men just hauling that beast in and loading it."

He looked Mark straight in the eyes.

"Listen, cop. There's one rule in the Ring: don't borrow trouble. Those borgs aren't our problem. They're the City's weapon. They come in, do their job, and disappear. We don't mess with them. We don't mess with them. We try not to cross paths with them. Makes life easier. Keeps you alive."

Derek set the cup down. The sharp clink of porcelain on saucer cut through the silence like a firing command. His voice dimmed, as if speaking from the past.

"I saw how it all started. During the war in Shanghai — the first infantry augs from BioTech. Crude, early models, nothing like the ones now. But even then... reaction times faster than any human's. They could already block pain. In the torso, at least. You can't switch off the nerves in the hands — you still need to shoot. I saw one charging with his guts hanging out, still firing until his head got blown clean off."

Derek fell silent, giving Mark a moment to take in the picture.

"So listen carefully. If one of them walks through that door right now, sits on our table, and takes a shit on it — I won't touch him. None of my people will touch him. Got it? That's not our war. Those are the City's ghosts, and the City can deal with them on its own. We don't get involved."

Derek's words hit the table with the weight of a verdict. *We don't get involved.*

Mark felt something coil inside him — a dull, helpless rage.

"So it's not your war, huh?" he shot back, his voice sharp and bitter.

"And when the City runs another 'cleanup,' wiping a sector off the map along with everyone living there — that's not your war either? You don't give a damn?"

He'd seen the reports himself. They called it "renovation." Mostly in the half-empty districts up north in the Ring.

Derek's face darkened.

"That's politics, cop. Filthy business. It doesn't concern us as long as—"

He didn't finish. Mari, who had been silently sipping her coffee, turned her head toward him. Just looked. And that alone was enough.

Derek froze mid-sentence. His fingers tightened around the cup. He drew a deep breath, gathering himself, and met Mark's gaze again. His tone had changed. No more dismissiveness — only a heavy, bitter fatigue.

"They... are pushing the Barrier," he said quietly. "First, they announce a 'renovation.' The police set up cordons, cutting off a piece of the Ring. They seize the territory, rewire it into their network. People usually flee, and the ones who don't... I have no idea what happens to them."

"And what happens if the City announces a renovation of, say, *your* generator?" Mark pressed.

Derek stared down at the table.

"Then it stops being a renovation," he growled through clenched teeth. "And becomes a war. A real one."

He took a sip of what was now cold coffee.

"You do understand," he went on, "a generator isn't just some humming box that keeps you up at night. It's our power — the heart of the sector. People don't pay us to protect them from other gangs. They pay us for light, for heat, for keeping their workshops running, for water in their homes. The generator is our treasury, our throne, and our god all at once. As long as it's ours, the Legion is strong. If we lose it... we're just a bunch of guys with rifles."

And he added, stealing a quick glance at Mari:

"So yeah — we shoot, they shoot. A lot of people die. And in the end they'll take it anyway, because *they* have ghosts. But we'll make damn sure they have to fight for every inch tooth and nail."

He said it almost apologetically, aware that none of it fit the image of the hardened veteran he projected.

"That's why this whole thing with the borgs pisses me off. I don't want to draw attention. We don't need a cleanup."

Mark felt the first crack appear in Derek's armor.

"Sooner or later the City will come for your generator," he said. "Yours is the closest to the Barrier right now. They'll cut off this sector, then the rest. And when that happens, the Legion dies. So this *is* your war too."

Derek was silent for a moment, his face turning into a stone mask. He absently rolled the empty cup in its saucer.

"Yeah. You're right," he finally admitted. "Sooner or later they'll come. But that'll be 'sooner or later.' You and your borgs — that's *now*. What good are you to me? I help you, and tomorrow a squad of those borgs shows up at my café door because you led them here. That's the best-case scenario. Worst case — the City uses it as a pretext for another cleanup. The Legion gets a war it's not ready for. Why the hell would I want that?"

He leaned closer to Mark and whispered:

"You're nothing but trouble, cop. No benefit."

Mark had nothing to say.

Mari calmly finished her coffee, set the cup down on the saucer — a soft click that echoed off the café walls. Then she looked at Derek again through the visor.

The confidence, the hardness, the patronizing tone — all of it vanished. A childish, superstitious fear flickered across Derek's face — the face of a man who had survived fire and death, the leader of a powerful gang. He dropped his gaze to the table, to the empty cup, unable to endure her silence.

And with him, the entire café suddenly fell still. Even the waitress stopped wiping the counter and froze in an unnatural pose.

"All right," Derek finally forced through clenched teeth. He still avoided looking into Mari's eyes.

He pulled a small, old wrist-comm from his pocket and placed it on the table.

"For emergencies. Now get out."

They stepped out into the snowy street. Mark got what he wanted — contacts, information — but something unpleasant and cold coiled in his chest.

Derek, the iron-hard leader of the Legion, the man who'd just refused him, had changed. He had obeyed her, and the fear in him was almost tangible.

Why?

Questions sparked one after another in Mark's mind. Who was she really? Derek's former lover, who knew his secrets? A liaison with other, more

powerful gangs the Legion didn't want to provoke? Or... something else? Something that could make a battle-hardened veteran avert his eyes like a frightened child?

He'd escaped one nightmare — but what had he allied himself with now?

The talk with Derek left a sour aftertaste — a mix of hope and even deeper dread. Mark had gained an ally, but the price of that alliance was unknown.

Mari didn't lead him back to her shop. Instead, she took him farther toward the edge of the Old City, where there were no cafés, no homes, into sectors whose numbers Mark didn't even know.

Into the dead zone.

Here the Ring showed its true, ancient face.

They walked down streets buried under untouched snow, past the skeletal husks of burned-out cars sunk into the ground. Buildings here were dying slowly, almost beautifully. The walls of old factories, stripped of their windows, looked like the skulls of giants staring into the gray sky with hollow sockets. Stunted, twisted trees grew through cracks in the concrete. Their black, frost-covered branches braided into strange patterns, like gothic script.

The wind sang through the empty workshops, its sound like organ music played in a ruined cathedral. Everything was wrapped in silence and snow. There was a grim poetry in this aesthetic of decay and abandonment — a place where time came to a halt and died, leaving behind only the beauty of withering.

"Do you have a place, Mark?" Mari asked. Her voice sounded unusually crisp in the cold air. "A place that pulls you in more than any other? Your personal axis mundi — the center of your world."

Mark stayed silent, turning over her strange question in his mind. He sifted through the places he once thought were his.

The sterile old apartment in the City where he'd lived before all this? No. Not a life — an existence inside a white, soulless cell. The memory of it made him sick.

Eliza's apartment? The epicenter of his collapse, a cracked reality. Her place, not his. He'd been a temporary guest there — a ghost in someone else's home.

"Babylon?" He'd spent every evening there, but that wasn't a place of strength — it was a place of weakness. A corner where he drowned his ghosts in cheap liquor.

He ran through all the options and realized he had none. He was a ship without a harbor, drifting between other people's realities.

"I don't know," he finally said. "I guess not."

Mari stopped and turned to him. The gray, snowy sky reflected in her visor.

"Everyone has such a place, Mark. It doesn't have to be a home. It can be anything. Something you're tied to emotionally, somewhere you feel..." She paused. "...real."

She walked on through the crisp, crunching snow, and he followed, listening to her quiet, measured voice.

"People call them by different names. Places of power. Bridges to a former life, or to those who are gone. They keep you anchored in this world, give you a point of balance while everything else collapses. Anchors of memory and feeling. Lines that connect you to yourself. Lose them — and you start to fall apart, as if stripped of gravity."

Then, without turning around, she added:

"Maybe you're afraid to admit it. Or maybe you've forgotten it. Where does it pull you when you stop holding yourself together?"

Her words hung in the sparkling air like ice crystals, dragging into the light something he'd locked up and labeled as forgotten. He tried to answer. He genuinely tried.

The war? Yes — there had been moments of absolute, terrifying reality. But that wasn't his anchor. That was a festering burn, not a home one longs to return to.

Or...

He stopped in the middle of the snow-laden, deserted street. The memory didn't return as an image — it came like a system crash, a sudden reboot of the mind.

The dreams he'd had after the war. They always returned in fragments: smells, flashes of light, screams. He'd written them off as nightmares — a PTSD diagnosis — and buried them under layers of cynicism and exhaustion that numbed every memory.

But the moment he closed his eyes, they surged upward.

Destruction. Blood. Glass towers folding inward, as if someone were crushing the city in a steel fist. Dust and fire billowing up into the sky, blotting out the sun. People below screaming, running, shoving one another — tiny figures scattered by chaos like dry leaves. Their voices merging into one long, drawn-out shriek, and that sound vibrated through his bones.

He was the wind driving the fire. The force shattering concrete. The horror they screamed from. In every crack of breaking stone — his own breath. In every cry — his own voice.

Why had he destroyed?

The war had chewed through his will, day after day, methodically, like a dull machine. His hands — to hold the rifle. His legs — to march where they told him. His eyes — to find the target. He lived someone else's life. An invisible, cold will moved him, pressed his finger onto the trigger. None of the killing was ever his choice. It was an order from somewhere above.

The smell of gun oil on the rifle. The sickly sweet smell of blood on the snow. Steps sinking into mud. Toes freezing in his boots, and still he had to keep going — because the order said so. No choice. Only motion along someone else's design.

That's when he understood: the enemy wasn't the one in the sights. The enemy was the machine that forced him to fire.

The system that turned a human into a weapon, a life into a function. Armies — just crowds of puppets tearing each other apart. The real monster wasn't across the front line. Even generals and politicians were pawns, same as Mark. The enemy lived in the very principle of obedience.

He buried that thought deep, but the rebellion never died. It lived in him all this time. And when the war ended, he saw the same pattern everywhere: in orders from superiors, in corporations, in the structure of the City, in technology. All of it was an extension of that same grotesque hierarchy. The weapons had simply changed: no longer rifles, but programs, patches, injected thoughts, propaganda wired straight into the brain.

He refused the patch not because he feared the tech — but because it was just another order in a different wrapper. Another attempt to climb into his mind and move his hands from the inside. And he said *no*. Alone, ridiculous, hopeless — but *no*.

There it was: his true place. His axis. Not faith or hope in some benevolent ruler, but resistance to the very idea of coercion. That eternal resistance from which chaos is born. The destruction of their neat, obedient world, glued together with hierarchy and submission.

That's why Eliza had stunned him that first night on the roof. She hadn't guessed his thoughts — she'd heard them. Read them in him like a forgotten, buried dream. She looked at the pathetic, exhausted cop, Mark Kane, and saw his true nature. Her words about destroying the City were neither seduction nor test — they were his own thoughts.

"Yes," he finally answered. "I want to destroy the order."

Mari stopped and turned to him. Her visor reflected only the snow between them. Did she even have eyes at all?

She watched him for several seconds, and then—for the first time since he'd met her—a faint but unmistakable smile touched her lips. It wasn't sympathetic or joyful. It held a calm, quiet satisfaction at having received exactly the answer she'd wanted.

And that thought unsettled him more than Derek's questions.

"And you?" he finally asked. "What's your place — that bookstore?"

"No," Mari laughed. "The store is just a vault, an archive. I like reading other people's lives—tragedies, dramas, unravelings... But that's not my place. My place is where stories end, and where they begin. In the rupture. Come. I'll show you something."

She led him again through the dead streets, but this time in a different direction, deeper into the industrial zone. They entered the stairwell of a ruined apartment block—a dark, blind shaft choked with debris and hunks of broken concrete. The building hadn't even been completed. The door to the roof had long been torn off its hinges, and the wind howled through the opening.

They stepped out under the open sky—and Mark saw something he had never seen before, something he couldn't have imagined.

A graveyard.

Stretching almost to the horizon, merging with the sky, lay rusted, snow-buried skeletons of military machines. Tanks with useless barrels pointing up at the heavens. Armored carriers like the husks of giant extinct insects. The frames of transporters, large drones resembling the bones of prehistoric birds. Thousands of tons of dead, decaying metal drowned in white silence.

A mute, frozen army that had lost its war not to an enemy, but to time. An endless field of death.

"Look," Mari said. She wasn't smiling. Her face behind the visor was completely serious. "Isn't it beautiful?"

"What's beautiful about a junkyard?" he muttered.

"It's not a junkyard," she replied. "It's peace. The end of all grand designs. The end of all rage and hatred. Empires, wars, machines—everything eventually comes to this. To death."

The endless white field was reflected in her visor.

"You want to destroy, Mark. But have you thought about what comes after destruction? This. Silence. And this is the most beautiful thing in this world. This is true deliverance."

They walked back through the heavy quiet of the snow-drowned industrial zones.

The hum of the generator, the shouts from the market, even the moan of the wind—all the sounds of the world stayed somewhere far behind. For the first time in this endless month, Mark didn't feel like a ghost chased by other phantoms. There was cold clarity in his mind. Today had ripped him out of his personal samsara.

They reached the bookstore in silence.

"I need to get my things," Mark said.

Mari nodded.

"I'll be here. Come back."

He went to Eliza's apartment one last time. The place no longer stirred pain or longing—just emptiness. A hollow shell, a stage prop from a past that had been a lie from the very beginning.

He packed his few belongings into an old bag. Then he opened the nightstand drawer where he had once found the graveyard of cuffs and took his own — just in case. The battery had long since run dry, the screen dead.

Before leaving the room, he looked out the window. Gray, miserable buildings under wet snow. The sight no longer filled him with despair. He went downstairs to his car — forgotten and written off by the City — and climbed inside. Even the Ring didn't want it; everyone here preferred older models.

He plugged the cuff into the console—not to connect to the network, but just to activate it. The display flickered for a second, showed a three-percent charge, then died again. But it was enough. The engine came alive.

"Bookstore," he told the car. "Old City."

Chapter 20. Footage That May Shock

Mark pushed the door open, and the faint chime of the bell hung in the stillness of the shop. The shelves were drowned in half-shadow; the books, almost alive, pressed against one another, hiding from the world outside the windows. Slinging his bag off his shoulder, he hesitated at the threshold for a moment — as if checking whether this wasn't just another hallucination.

A thick leather-bound tome rested on Mari's knees, and when she lifted her head, Mark realized she had been waiting for him.

Sitting down beside her, he noticed something on the table buried under the weight of folios — an object that didn't belong there at all: a dagger. Ancient, with a handle carved from time-blackened bone. On it, a tiny figure of a four-armed woman. Two of her hands were folded in a gesture of prayer, and the other two held something Mark couldn't quite make out—either tiny skulls or some kind of fruit. The blade was dark, matte.

"What's this?" Mark asked.

"Insurance," Mari said curtly, without looking up from the book. "The Ring is dangerous—especially for a woman running a shop full of rare things. I always carry it."

He studied the woman engraved on the handle. There was something predestined in her posture, like the movements of an ancient ritual.

"Old?" he asked.

"Yes." Mari finally tore her eyes from the page, and her voice carried the warm undertone of a connoisseur speaking about a precious artifact. "A ritual dagger of the Thuggee. An Indian cult of stranglers."

She paused, letting the word *stranglers* settle in the air.

"That's Kali, the goddess of death. The Thuggee were her priests. They believed Kali forbade them to spill blood, so they strangled their victims

with a ceremonial cloth. And they used the dagger to make ritual cuts on the corpse, to release the soul and guide it toward the goddess."

Without looking at him, she flipped the page.

"If you've decided to stay, do something useful. Read. Knowledge is a weapon no one can take from you."

She was leafing through a book with a strange title—*Liber Azerate*. Paper, leather—an artifact from another time.

Mark shook his head.

"I don't want to read. I'm tired of riddles."

Mari closed the book, marking the page with the dagger. In her visor, like in a black mirror, he saw himself—angry and exhausted.

"All right," she said after a moment. "You want to act. What leads do you have?"

He tried to piece together the last days of his work: Eliza, the Center, Babylon — and all of it had been either a lie or a dream. None of the links led anywhere except one. The image of Eliza killing a borg. Was even part of that memory real?

Back then, they'd left without even examining the crime scene. No standard procedures, no search for evidence.

"Yes," Mark said slowly. "There is one lead."

He connected the cuff to the charger. The indicator blinked to life—just enough. The old hunter's thrill began to stir in him, a feeling he hadn't touched in years.

"Silas's place — the dream interpreter. That's where Eliza killed the borg. I want to check if it really happened," he finally said. "I'll go alone."

Mari thought for a moment, then nodded.

"Be careful, Mark. They might be watching the place."

He walked toward the car not like a ghost drifting nowhere, but like a detective heading to a crime scene. For the first time in this endless month, he had a purpose.

His mind, unexpectedly clear, weighed the risks. The cuff. Take it or leave it? On one hand, wearing it was like putting on a beacon; if the Agency was tracking him, they'd see everything. On the other hand, if they wanted to find him, they would — cuff or not. To them, he might be a valuable witness. Or bait.

And more importantly, the cuff barely picked up a signal in the far sectors. Silas's house sat in a dead zone. The Agency wouldn't see him there, most likely.

And a cuff was a tool. Video capture, data analysis, access to cached entries from the police network. Going without it meant losing before the fight even started. He was tired of being a ghost. It was time to become a hunter.

The car started up soundlessly, the heater humming to life. He fed it the address of Silas's house, and while it crept through the snowy streets, he strapped on his old cuff.

The screen flickered, showing the standard interface, and the familiar green light lit up on Mark's wrist once again.

He was back in the network—and that made him feel both relieved and deeply uneasy.

The house was exactly as he remembered it—an old two-story building of dark brick, standing silent in the narrow, snow-choked alley. Mark stepped out of the car. No one around. Only silence and the crunch of snow under his boots.

The first floor was one large, shadowy space — a warren of abandoned workshops cluttered with debris and the remains of old furniture.

He stepped inside, instinctively reached for his holster, then changed his mind. No one had been waiting for him here all this time. His boots crunched over a layer of broken glass and plaster. Light leaking through the gaps in the boarded-up windows revealed small, frozen tableaux: a workbench with rusted clamps like the jaws of some animal; a heap of dusty bottles in the corner; the skeletal frame of a couch with split upholstery and coils sticking out.

He moved through the rooms carefully, sweeping the flashlight from his cuff over the dark corners. Nothing. No fresh tracks, not the slightest sign that anyone had been here recently. Just dust, decay, and the silence, broken only by his own coughing.

Then he headed toward the narrow, steep staircase at the far end of the hall. The actual crime scene was upstairs.

He climbed to the second floor. Listened—no rustle, not a single sound, only the pounding of his heart in his temples. The house was clearly empty.

He approached the door at the end of the corridor. In his memory, it had been blasted to splinters by shotgun fire, but now it stood intact. Old, wooden, with peeling paint. Locked.

Mark pulled an ancient multitool from his pocket—a useful little thing he'd bought at the market for a couple of credits. A simple pick. A skill useless in the City of digital locks, but essential in the Old City.

A few minutes of fiddling and a faint scrape of metal later, he popped the old lock open. The door yielded, and he stepped inside carefully.

The room was crammed with furniture. An old, sagging couch, two armchairs buried under heaps of books and papers, a low table. By the wall—a neatly made bed. A thick scent of incense Silas must have used in his work hung in the air.

The owner no longer lived here—and hadn't for a very long time.

He examined the room methodically, corner by corner. Nothing. No signs of struggle, no stains on the floor, no blood, no traces of gunpowder. He checked the tiny bathroom—clean as well. Just the apartment of a somewhat peculiar, slightly unkempt man. The shelves were packed with books, books, and more books. Mostly dream dictionaries, manuals on dream interpretation, old psychoanalysis monographs, cheap editions of esoteric literature.

Nothing that could confirm his memory. Not a single detail.

Despair shifted into dull anger at himself. So he really had cracked. There had been no borg. Everything was nothing but noise in his own corrupted code.

And then the world blinked.

The light from the window changed for a heartbeat—sharper, colorless. The smell of dust was suddenly replaced by the acrid sting of burnt powder. Mark turned around.

Everything had changed. The door he had just picked open was blown apart into splinters. Burn marks darkened the floorboards. It was the same room—and yet not the same. A crime scene, exactly as he remembered it.

Mark no longer hesitated. He stepped over to the desk, its drawer locked. He broke the lock with the multitool.

Inside, beneath a stack of papers, lay what he had been looking for—an old, battered notebook. Clients' names, dates, brief notes about dreams. A folded sheet slipped out from between the pages. A note.

The handwriting was hurried, clearly a woman's.

Silas, I beg you, be careful. What you've gotten yourself into... these people don't forgive. If you need help, there's a group in our sector — the Children of Chaos. They can put you in touch with the witch. S. says she has mismatched eyes; she can help you. Please reach out to them. A.

A witch with mismatched eyes. Eliza. There was the link.

He slipped the note into his pocket. And at that moment, from downstairs on the first floor, he heard a distinct, long groan of old floorboards.

Mark drew his pistol, pressed himself against the wall behind a cabinet, and held his breath. Quiet, measured footsteps drifted up from below. Someone was climbing the stairs directly toward him.

The steps drew closer, fell silent, and a figure slid into the room. Tall, dressed in a sharp suit, moving with astonishing speed. Mark managed to fire twice, but the bullets chewed into the wall, kicking up clouds of dust where the borg had been a split second earlier. He missed.

The borg was already in the middle of the room, and in the next instant a white-hot spike tore through Mark's shoulder. The pain was sharp, blinding — he nearly dropped his gun. The borg clearly didn't intend to kill him, only disable him; otherwise Mark would already be dead.

He staggered, his temples roaring, thoughts collapsing into raw animal fury. The borg was faster, stronger, more precise. Neither training nor experience — nothing could help him.

And in that helplessness, something broke free. Not a decision — a flash of rage. Pain and fear burned away, leaving behind crystalline clarity. The world didn't slow down — *he* got faster. The sound of the gunshot dissolved in warped space. Dust motes froze in the air, the colors drained away; all that remained were Mark, his target, and a shard of crystalline hatred.

Without hesitation, Mark switched the gun to his good hand. In the suspended, viscous air he saw not only the borg, but a set of trajectories,

perfect impact points. He squeezed the trigger. Again. The shots were like dry clicks of a metronome. The borg's head burst apart under the impacts — shards of plastic, bone fragments, and clumps of sparking synthetic fiber.

The borg collapsed to the floor like a puppet with its strings cut.

Sound, color, and the throbbing fire in his shoulder slammed back into Mark with unbearable force.

He stood over the body, breathing hard. The gun in his hand was smoking. This wasn't luck — it was power, born from pure rage and the will to destroy.

He couldn't stay here any longer. He had killed one of them, and for that — surely for that — they had taken Eliza. Likely killed her. Others would come now, and there would be many of them.

Mark bolted from the room, stumbled down the dark staircase, raced across the cluttered first floor, and burst into the snow-covered alley. He ran toward his car. His lungs were empty, each heartbeat hammering molten iron into his torn shoulder.

He needed to get out, and fast. Thought he'd find clues and follow a trail? Well, here was a trail — seventy kilos of it. Not exactly portable.

Weaving the car through the western sector toward the center, Mark made a detour and hid it in old Hughes's warehouse, just in case.

He stumbled into the bookshop soaked, dusted with snow, leaving a melting path across the floor. Mari came out to meet him.

"What happened, Mark?"

She listened to his broken, feverish account in silence. Then, without a word, she took him by the hand, sat him down on the old couch, treated his wounded shoulder. She pulled the bullet out with a battered wartime device — disinfectant and anesthetic in one — and bandaged the wound.

Her hands were steady, sure.

"Rest," was all she said. "You need to lie down."

He was too exhausted to argue and slumped back against the couch. The last thing he heard before sinking into heavy, feverish sleep was the rustle of pages. Mari had sat down again with her book.

He woke to a sharp, unpleasant sound. The cuff on the table had come to life, vibrating, its screen flashing red.

"What the...?" Mark muttered, trying to sit up.

"Information concerning you has been detected, Mark. Display?" the device asked.

"Yes," he exhaled.

The cuff projected a large holo in midair, like a TV news broadcast. The face of a synth-anchor from the official news.

"Police officer and war veteran Daniel Cross has tragically died in the line of duty," the anchor began, the voice stern and solemn.

A photo appeared. The borg Mark had killed an hour ago.

"...the suspect in this brutal, unprovoked attack is former police officer Mark Kane, dismissed from service due to psychological instability. The following footage may be disturbing. We advise keeping children away from the screen."

The image switched. Footage from the dead borg's visor.

There he was — Mark — holding a gun, calmly firing again and again straight into the operator's face. The picture jerked, static flared, another shot — and the feed died.

There had been no gun in Cross's hands.

"Citizens are urged to use extreme caution," the anchor concluded, and Mark's face filled the screen. "The suspect is armed and extremely dangerous. The City Committee has announced a reward for any information leading to the capture of the killer."

They hadn't just framed him — they'd turned him into a monster and declared open season on him. Now it wouldn't be just the faceless Agency borgs tracking him. The entire Ring, every small-time thug or desperate drifter — all of them would be his enemies. There was never any shortage here of people willing to earn their thirty pieces of silver for someone's head.

But something didn't fit.

A kaleidoscope of the past weeks flashed through his mind. Eliza, the captain of the Center, powerful and dangerous, taken cleanly and quietly. In a dead-end alley, without a single witness. Agency work — surgical, invisible, a ghost operation.

And they turned him — Mark Kane, a washed-up cop with a liquor shelf for a soul — into a media circus. Emergency broadcast. Official statement from the City Committee. A bounty. Why?

Why the theatrics?

Catching him would've been easy. They could trace him through his cuff or his car. They could've sent three vans, and he'd disappear just like Eliza. But they didn't.

He thought and thought, but no answer came. It was illogical. Unprofessional. Unless... unless the real goal wasn't to catch him but to make everyone see that he was being hunted. Turn him into a public enemy, a monster. But why?

That made no sense either.

And Mark simply stopped thinking about it. He was wanted; they were searching — which meant he needed to search not for answers, but for a way out.

The holo had long since faded. The quiet, cozy room, snow falling outside. In the middle of this silence, Mari sat in her old chair, turning pages of an ancient book, paying him no attention at all.

Mark realized, with a dull sort of surprise, that he wasn't afraid. Here, in this building cut off from the world, a place that stored history, the eye of the storm, all that noise — the bounty, the hunt, the Agency — felt distant, unreal. Something happening to someone else, in another universe.

And for a moment, he allowed himself to believe it.

Chapter 21. You Are Alone, and It's Fair

Two shots — and the world collapsed in on her, flooding her senses with the metallic stench of the tracks and the cold taste of rain on her lips.

Dan dropped onto the wet pavement, clutching his stomach, his face drained of all color. The second shot missed. Frankie bolted, his figure flickering like a dark stain in the gray curtain of rain.

"Ten-thirteen, officer down, 300 Pleasant Street, requesting backup and EMS," Liza said, her voice trembling. "Pursuing suspect, heading north."

She tore after him. Dan's groans stayed behind — a dead weight she couldn't help now. Her boots slapped through puddles, her lungs burned with icy air. She was faster, angrier, younger. She couldn't let that bastard get away.

Frankie dove into a dark, echoing underpass beneath the railroad bridge. Liza rushed in after him, and reality shrank for an instant to that concrete corridor. Her pounding footsteps ricocheted off the walls. Above, a train roared past, the vibration rolling through her bones, blending with the hammering of her own heart.

She swung onto Florence Street, gulping at the air. On both sides, the road narrowed between blank walls of four- and five-story office buildings of dark, rain-soaked brick. Frankie was ahead of her, pulling away, already a good hundred yards out. For some reason, the signs burned into her memory: "Great Expectations," and behind it "Right at Home."

Great expectations right at home, she thought bitterly. *What a piece of shit.*

The street climbed upward, curving right, pulling away from the office blocks into a residential area. Rows of standard two-story houses, neat

lawns, cars parked along the curb. She couldn't let him slip deeper into the neighborhood. She pushed harder.

Frankie spun around and fired again, but Liza didn't even flinch. That was his mistake — she had already closed the distance twice over. Now she knew she would hit him. Her focus narrowed to the figure ahead; she saw nothing else.

"Drop the weapon!" she screamed, her voice tearing from running and rage.

But he kept bolting toward the intersection, hoping to cut right and weave through the houses. Liza skidded to a stop next to an old Boston Globe newspaper box — paint peeling, a cloudy plastic front, a yellowed issue visible inside.

She raised her gun. Inhale—exhale—pause, just like they'd taught her — and she opened fire to kill. Dull pops. The echo slammed into the brick walls, merging with the roar of the passing train overhead. She didn't count the shots, just squeezed the trigger again and again. Frankie dropped as if someone had switched him off and lay still on the wet lawn.

She rushed toward him, keeping him in her sights. It was over. She kicked his gun into a puddle — and then she saw her.

A few meters from Frankie's body, on grass soaked through with blood, lay a girl about seven years old. Pale blond braids fanned out around her. Her dress was drenched, clinging to her tiny frame.

A sharp ringing flooded Liza's ears, cutting off every sound. The pistol slipped from her hands, disappearing soundlessly into the grass. *How?* Where had the girl come from? Liza hadn't seen her — no shadow, no cry. The bullet had been meant for Frankie. A ricochet?

She lunged toward the child and fell to her knees in the puddle. Ice-cold water burned through her uniform, but she barely felt it. She rolled the girl over — a crimson stain, a neat little hole right over her heart. No breath. Eyes blank as glass.

Her hands moved on their own: palms on the sternum, compressions — one, two, three. Beneath her fingers, the ribs felt like brittle rods. "Breathe," she repeated, starting another cycle, harder, faster, the proper rhythm already meaningless. The only answer was the squelch of water beneath her knees and the distant rumble of the train. Her thoughts shattered

into a thousand red shards — the braids, blood, grass — and somewhere deep inside, a whisper rose: *You killed her*. Ricochet or poor aim — it didn't matter.

She kept pressing until her arms went numb, until the rain washed the blood away, erasing evidence — and she knew it was too late.

Chaos filled her head. *You killed her*, the cold voice repeated, as cold as the puddle around her. She'd been aiming at Frankie — but she hit the girl. Accident or not, it didn't matter anymore.

Protocol. She had to follow protocol, cling to something simple and solid. Raise the weapon, holster it, report. But her hands wouldn't obey.

"Dispatcher, unit eighteen. Suspect neutralized. EMT needed. Civilian down at 25 Florence Street. Need backup, urgent," she rasped into the radio.

The wail of sirens grew closer. Quiet at first, it rose fast and turned into a piercing, accusing scream that sliced straight through the day.

Patrol cars arrived, then paramedics. Someone gently took her by the shoulder and guided her toward a cruiser. She didn't resist.

Then everything dissolved into one monotonous, half-delirious haze.

The events of those days never formed a coherent picture; they remained in her mind as a series of painful, disconnected fragments.

The precinct. The same smell of spilled coffee, wet wool from rain-soaked coats, and something sour that had seeped into the old walls. They made her sit for hours on a hard plastic chair in the hallway, while behind closed doors her life was being turned into paperwork. Other cops walked past and looked away. No one wanted to meet her eyes. No longer a colleague — just a problem.

They called her into the captain's office. He sat behind his desk buried in paperwork, his face gray with exhaustion. Beside him were two men from Internal Affairs — same cheap suits, same blank expressions. They asked her the same questions again and again.

"Why did you open fire to kill?"

"Did you see a civilian in the line of fire?"

"Why didn't you wait for backup?"

She answered monotonously, without emotion, repeating memorized lines from the manual. But in her head there were no questions — only the face of the little girl with braids lying on the grass.

One day, as she sat there waiting to be called in to see the investigator, the door of the next office opened. A woman came out — her face swollen from crying.

She noticed Liza, and for a moment confusion flickered in her eyes. Then her pupils widened, and all her grief and pain fused into a single point.

"You!" she screamed, and the shout was so fierce the glass partition trembled. "Murderer! Damn you! I curse you! May you burn in hell!"

She lunged at Liza, but two officers grabbed her instantly, holding her back. The woman writhed in their grip, her face twisted with sobs, and she never once looked away from Liza with those eyes full of pure hatred. Liza sat frozen, unable to move, taking in this torrent of searing pain she herself had caused.

Finally, they announced the decision. Dry and temporary. Suspension from duty until the end of the investigation. Surrender your badge and service weapon. Mandatory therapy sessions.

Her hand didn't tremble as she held the pen; she simply signed the report in silence.

She walked down the echoing corridor, and it felt as if this path would never end. Conversations died the moment she passed. She felt the looks — curiosity, judgment, quiet gloating. With every step, she understood more clearly: she was no longer a cop but a killer on leave.

The heavy front door slammed shut behind her, cutting her off from the life she knew. With that slam, something inside her stayed on the other side.

One day, in the middle of this endless hell, Liza returned to her apartment on the edge of South Boston and found that Ethan was gone. The silence of the place crashed down on her, louder than any scream. He'd packed his things — a couple of bags of clothes, his guitar, and a stack of blues vinyl. No note, no message on the old Nokia. Just the echo of footsteps in the hallway and an empty closet where his shirts used to hang. She

stood in the center of the room, feeling the air coil in her lungs like the smoke of a cigarette she hadn't yet lit.

Their relationship had cracked long ago, and now that crack had simply vanished from her life. Work had already been poisoning them, and after the incident everything only got worse. Obsession, guilt eating her from the inside — venom she brought home every night. Ethan tried to hold on. "You're here, with me, Liz. Forget everything," he'd whisper as they lay in bed. And she would stare at the ceiling, silent, watching the cracks spread like translucent veins on a child's hand.

Now he was gone, and she wasn't angry. Just empty. No tears, no scream. And the whisper in her mind:

You're alone. And it's fair.

Time folded into a loop, and every new day was a repeat of the one before. The internal investigation dragged on like a chronic illness. The commission dug through details: weather, house number, the exact time of day.

Life froze: morning — coffee alone, day — calls with her lawyer, evening — an empty apartment. She barely ate, barely slept. She sat by the window, watching the rain wash the lights of the business district across the canal. *"You deserve this,"* whispered the voice in her head. Quiet, like the rustle of a newspaper with the headline *"Cop Kills Child."*

By day, the apartment walls seemed to close in on her, pushing her outside, and she wandered to the abandoned park near the Fort Point bridge — cracked benches, trash in the bushes, black canal water smelling of rust. She sat on a damp bench, wrapped in her old coat, staring at the water for hours. The rain drummed on her hood, the drops sliding down her cheeks, blending with something warm. Across the canal — blurred lights of downtown Boston, skyscrapers glowing like lies. Here, in solitude, the image of the girl came back sharper.

Sirens again, shouting, the flash of a shot. Blood pooling. The braids.

"Accident," she repeated. But guilt grew like mold creeping across the apartment walls. She sat until her legs went numb, until the voice inside her grew louder: *"You're a killer. You deserved this."* The cold dug into her, reached her bones, but she didn't want to leave — here by the water she felt closer to that girl. To her shadow.

By evening, dusk thickened, the voices in her head turned to a low hum, and she dragged herself back toward South Boston. Her refuge became Lucky's Lounge — a basement on Congress Street with no sign outside and red neon glowing in the windows. Dim light, the smell of old wood and damp. Someone always played blues on the tiny stage — a jagged saxophone line or a guitar. The music seeped into the wound — *"Stormy Weather"* or *"The Thrill is Gone"* — a shiver of loss.

Liza would sit at the bar, nod at the bartender — an old Irishman who never asked questions. *"Scotch. Double."* And the glass appeared. Slowly, methodically, sip by sip. The burn in her throat spread warmth through her veins, but not oblivion. She wasn't trying to forget — only to dull the guilt. That whisper from the park: *"You're alone because you deserve it."* The blues amplified it, yet soothed it — like an old friend who reminds you of the pain but won't let you drown in it.

Around her — the silhouettes of regulars: dockworkers, off-duty cops, loners like her. No one approached, and that was a blessing. Her depression deepened: days in the park, thinking; nights in the bar, drinking. The investigation dragged on, Ethan didn't call, and the girl's voice echoed with every sip. She was alone — and this was only the beginning.

The whiskey no longer burned. The third glass slipped down easily, like water, leaving behind a dull warmth in her chest. Her head was filling with lead, her thoughts barely moved, yet they remained clear. A clarity worse than any hangover.

The musician on the tiny stage kept playing, stubborn and relentless, repeating the same pain in different variations. Liza listened — and in front of her she saw the bridge. Cold iron railings, black water below her feet, the cold weight of a gun. How many times had she fired it in her dreams? How many times had she watched herself fall?

The dreams blended into one endless nightmare, and she stopped counting them.

Liza ran a hand over her face, trying to wipe the images away, but they had seeped into her like the smell of cheap tobacco.

"One more," she muttered to the bartender.

And that was when she noticed someone sitting beside her.

A blonde. Hair pulled back into a perfectly neat bun. She smiled — and two small dimples appeared on her cheeks. The smile looked too alive for this basement, too real.

"End of the world or something?" she asked, teasing but without malice.

Liza didn't answer. She took another sip and stared into her glass again.

"What happened to you?" the blonde asked. "What did you lose?"

Liza wanted to tell her to screw off, but instead a bitter, drunken truth slipped out:

"Everything. Meaning. Life. Myself," she mumbled, tongue thick and clumsy. "I'm empty."

The blonde tilted her head slightly. There was no pity in her eyes — only interest. Sharp, calculating.

"And if someone offered you a new meaning, a real one? You'd have to give up everything else, but you don't care anymore, do you?"

Liza tapped her glass against the counter.

"Give up what, exactly — 'everything else'?"

"Everything you have. People, your past, your pain. Yourself," the blonde said, her smile unchanged — only the dimples deepening slightly.

Liza suddenly realized: nothing was holding her anymore. Not the job. Not the apartment. Not Ethan, who had left without a word. Only the guilt, burning through every day she lived.

And she made her choice.

"Yes," she said.

The blonde nodded, and that was the end of the conversation. Liza took a sip, staring into the cloudy bottom of her glass. The music stretched into a long note, like the hum of rain outside the door.

When she lifted her head again, the stool beside her was empty. The blonde was gone.

Liza stepped out of the bar, and the door shut behind her with a dull thud. The music stayed inside, locked in the basement. Outside, rain poured down. Heavy drops stung her face and soaked through her coat at once. The air smelled of wet asphalt and the sea buried somewhere past the docks.

The street was empty. A few scattered streetlights cast pale circles on the facades of warehouses and the glass walls of new buildings, leaving blurred halos in the fog. Everything else was swallowed by darkness.

She walked without watching where she was going and soon realized she had turned onto Seaport Boulevard. A long, straight stretch of asphalt disappearing into the night. No cars. No people. The city had gone silent, leaving her alone with the rain and the void.

The weight of the gun at her belt pulled at her hip. Recently bought — not regulation, not by the book. She wasn't even sure why she'd done it. Wanted the familiar feel of metal? Wanted to prove to herself she could still hold a weapon? Or had she been preparing an exit for the moment the girl's voice in her head became too loud?

She walked along the boulevard, each step echoing through her body — hollow, needless.

Ahead — the bridge. A faint vibration came through the roadway, and the sensation deepened the emptiness inside her, as if the city itself had exhaled and fallen silent.

Liza stepped out onto the middle of the bridge. The lamps hummed overhead, their light mirrored in the dark puddled asphalt. No movement — just her, the rain-slick pavement, and her own breathing pulsing in her chest.

Below her, the canal churned with black water — thick as crude oil. It smelled of rusted iron and sea salt. The water didn't reflect the light; it devoured it — like an abyss one longs to fall into and disappear without a trace. To find peace.

Ahead, the outlines of the financial district barely showed through the haze. The skyscrapers rose into the sky, but their tops vanished into the milky fog. Lights blurred, smeared, and faded. The city hid itself, unwilling to look at her.

Liza stopped, grabbed the railing, and climbed onto the parapet. The concrete beneath her boots was slick, the wind cutting through her soaked coat.

She stood above the black water, her chest pounding, but there was no fear.

Liza drew her gun. The smooth, light metal settled into her hand with a familiar ease. She raised it and pressed the barrel to her right temple.

Rain lashed the bridge. Somewhere far away a siren moaned — muffled, distant, as if from another world. The streetlights behind her flickered, turning her shadow on the rails into a trembling silhouette about to dissolve into the air.

Then everything went silent. Abruptly, as if a needle had lifted off a record.

The rain froze in midair, droplets hanging in motionless strands, like beads strung on an invisible thread. The city's hum vanished, the lamps stopped humming. Even her breath felt foreign.

Liza slowly lowered the gun.

Perfect stillness — the world itself had ceased to exist.

Fog pressed in from all sides. Dense, milky, almost tangible, it engulfed the bridge. The skyscrapers ahead dissolved into it completely. Everything was gone.

Something warm on her temple. She touched it — sticky, wet. Blood. She must have cut herself with the gun, pressing it too hard against her skin. A red droplet slid down her cheek, merging with the frozen rain.

And then she saw her.

The girl.

Pale braids stuck to her shoulders, the dress soaked and heavy, its hem dragging across the asphalt. She stood just a few steps away, right on the bridge. Her face was pale, her eyes empty — doll-like, hollow.

The girl turned — and ran.

Her feet barely touched the ground, yet the sound of her steps shattered the silence, sharp as an echo in an empty corridor.

"Stop!" The word tore itself from Liza's throat. Her voice trembled and sounded muffled, swallowed by the fog.

And she sprinted after her.

The bridge was dissolving. The streetlights vanished one by one, swallowed by the white void, until all that remained was the run itself: the slick concrete beneath her feet, the flicker of a white dress ahead, and the sticky blood on her temple, sliding down faster with every breath.

Chapter 22. We Know Who You Are

Liza ran.

She ran across the wet concrete slabs; each step echoed as it had in that Pleasant Street tunnel. On her left — dim lamps swallowed in milky fog; on her right — a low railing above the invisible water of the canal. The girl in the white dress was the only landmark in this void — a small, retreating speck.

The fog thickened with every breath. It didn't conceal the world — it erased it, layer by layer. The sound of her own steps grew muffled, her breath burst out in pale clouds that refused to disperse, hanging in the air behind her.

She ran, but the landscape no longer changed. The lamps repeated — one after another, like an endless, looping corridor. The girl ahead neither drew closer nor farther, holding the same distance: ten steps, maybe fifteen. Liza's lungs burned, her legs grew heavier as her clothes grew soaked, but she couldn't stop. This is a dream, the thought flashed through her mind, but the pain in her muscles was real — as real as the cold metal of the railing she grabbed to keep from falling.

Then, reluctantly, the fog ahead began to thin — as if it didn't want to let her go. Something emerged through it, not the lights of the city, but dark, squat silhouettes. Two-story houses with black, hollow windows. Sharp roofs covered in moss and streaks of rust leaned over the street. Beyond them, the road sank into darkness.

Liza slowed, then stopped, gasping for air. Her chest heaved; each inhale rasped, and the fog finally receded. The girl had vanished — dissolved the moment the fog cleared fully, leaving behind an empty street. No flicker of a dress, no echo of footsteps. Silence pressed down, thick and heavy, like the instant after a shot.

She stood in the middle of a street that couldn't possibly exist here. Rain poured — not the cold, slicing Boston rain. Warm, oily droplets fell from a black sky, clouds hanging low over the roofs. The air smelled of wet ash and ozone — like the air after a lightning strike. She turned — the bridge was gone; only this street remained, wedged between houses that felt older than the world.

Her footsteps echoed off the walls, but the sound was dull and thick. Darkness here wasn't the absence of light — it was a substance. It flowed out of the empty windows and pooled in puddles that didn't reflect light but devoured it. Dead tree branches jutted from cracked earth, clawing at the air. They didn't move, not even in the rain — frozen, petrified, yet something shifted now and then in their shadows. Liza didn't stop to look.

She was alone — completely alone — yet the solitude felt different here. In Boston, she got lost in crowds: in bars full of regulars, in the little park by the channel. There, loneliness hurt, pierced, burned like a bullet lodged in her chest. But here it was part of something larger, something all-encompassing. It didn't weigh on her shoulders, didn't tighten around her throat. It simply existed — like the rain, like the dark.

It accepted her.

With every step, she felt lighter. This dead, shadowed world accepted her as she was — a killer, an outcast, a broken thing. The world of people and rules had pushed her out, judged her, cursed her. But here... here the rain whispered without words:

We know who you are.

We don't care.

Welcome home.

She studied the windows of the houses. Sometimes, deep behind the glass, something moved — jittery, shapeless silhouettes — but they didn't frighten her. They were just residents of this place, like her. In this world, everything was a shadow: bodiless, nameless, free from judgment. No cops avoiding her eyes. No grieving mothers screaming "killer". Only darkness wrapping its arms around her.

She walked, and for the first time in weeks the crushing weight in her chest began to ease. Not vanish — no, it was buried too deep — but loosen.

The rain washed away everything except the truth, and she could finally breathe.

Liza wasn't afraid. She walked, and the darkness walked with her.

Then a sound broke the silence of the dead city — sharp, unpleasant, utterly foreign to this place. The sputtering buzz of an old, dying neon transformer struggling to flare to life.

Liza looked around. On the street corner, above the window of an old shop, a sign flickered.

Green tubes hissed, stuttered, filling with uneven light. Finally, the glowing text trembled into clarity:

YOUR SHOP

The "S" was broken or burned out. It flickered weakly, barely visible in the warm rain. So the sign read something else entirely.

YOUR HOP.

Your jump. Your hope.

The sign, with its broken letter and mocking message, was the first sign of life in the city. The first invitation. Liza, without hesitation, walked toward it. A thick layer of dust and grime covered the glass storefront, making it look almost opaque. The neon above lived its own sickly life, buzzing and throwing trembling green reflections onto the wet asphalt. The old wooden door with a large brass handle, darkened with time, was unlocked.

Liza pushed it, and in response came a melodic, strangely out-of-place chime of a bell. She stepped inside. The shop was empty.

Tall shelves rose upward, disappearing into an unseen ceiling, but their boards held nothing but a thick, untouched layer of dust. The smell of an abandoned building lingered — cardboard, dust, and faint echoes of fluorescent light.

The only illumination came from that same neon sign outside. Its sickly green glow seeped through the dirty window, flooding the empty room with a ghostly, underwater radiance and casting her distorted shadow across the floor.

Liza walked deeper into the shop, carefully stepping across the dusty floor toward the counter hiding in the gloom. Behind it, in a high chair that resembled a throne, sat a figure in a dark hooded cloak, facing away from her.

"I've been waiting for you," she said without turning. The quiet, feminine voice filled the entire space, every particle of this dead, empty silence.

Liza didn't even manage to take another step. Space collapsed. A moment ago she had been several meters from the chair, and now she found herself right in front of it, close enough to touch the rough, dark fabric of the cloak. The shadow still sat with its back to her.

And everything around her exploded into whispering.

Voices were everywhere. They came from the shadows in the corners, from beneath the empty shelves, and were born in the very air around her. Dozens of voices — male, female, children's — intertwined into one eerie, curious chorus.

"Liza... — Eliza... — Elizabeth..."

They repeated her full, long-forgotten name.

"Why did you come?" a child's voice whispered right by her ear. "What are you looking for?" asked another, old and creaking, from somewhere below. "Salvation? — Oblivion? — Power?"

The whispering faded just as abruptly as it had begun. The shadow in the chair rose. She didn't stand — she grew, stretching upward until her dark silhouette blocked out all the ghostly green light spilling in from the window. The woman towered like a black pillar reaching the unseen ceiling, and at the same time leaned so close that Liza felt her breath.

"I will give you everything," the woman said, her voice firm and commanding, ringing out right in front of Liza.

Liza tried to see the face beneath the hood, but there was only darkness, swallowing the light.

"I don't know what I want..." Liza whispered the most honest words she had spoken in her entire life.

"Lies!" a voice rasped from the side.

"Is it?" the woman asked, with a hint of motherly indulgence. "You sought meaning — and I will give it to you. And strength, so no one can ever hurt you again. Power — to decide for yourself who is right. Wealth — to never think about money again. Everything you have been denied. Everything you deserve."

Liza stared into the darkness beneath the hood, and the voice inside her — the one that whispered of guilt and justice — fell silent. The empti-

ness inside her craved to be filled. And the woman offered her exactly that. Meaning. A purpose.

"Yes," she said firmly, without hesitation. "I'm looking for meaning."

"Then we will seal our pact," the figure said. "With blood."

She extended her hand, and from her sleeve a thin ritual knife slid into her palm. The woman removed her glove, revealing a pale, elegant feminine hand. Then, without the slightest hesitation, she drew the blade across her own palm. Blood spurted. In the neon glow it shone with an alien, chemical sheen, as if it belonged to some fantastical, otherworldly creature.

This is a dream. Surely a dream. A nightmare.

"We always sleep, Elizabeth," the woman replied. "But some of us know how to see other people's dreams."

She grabbed Liza's hand. The strength of the grip was inhuman, as if steel vises clamped down on her bones. The blade cut through skin — pain slashed with a blinding burst. Their palms locked, wound to wound, and Liza felt foreign, cold blood flowing into her own hot blood. On the back of her hand, a sigil flared, burning the skin as though molten iron were being pressed into flesh.

The hood fell.

The woman's face was disfigured by jagged, ugly scars crossing it from side to side. Long, curved horns grew from beneath hair black as tar, and her eyes were golden, serpentine. The face of a demon — and it was smiling at her.

"Now you are my daughter," Lilith whispered, and her kiss was not the touch of lips but a seal. It burned away the old name and inscribed a new one. "And I name you Elizazdra, queen of demons."

The world sank into darkness, and Eliza woke up in her own bed.

The rain had stopped. Through the grimy windows, faint, dusty rays of morning sunlight seeped into the room. Beside her, on the floor, lay an empty bottle of gin. So she'd gotten drunk and passed out last night. Everything that happened on the bridge, in that dead city — drunken delirium. A dream.

Eliza sat up in bed and, for the first time in many weeks, felt relief.

The heavy, deathlike weight of guilt was gone. The girl's voice in her head was silent. Inside — emptiness, light and painless. They had taken not only her soul, but all the pain along with it. She was free.

She stood up and, swaying slightly, walked to the bathroom. Approaching the mirror, she paused. At first, she didn't understand what was wrong, and then she realized.

Her right pupil had turned black; the shine was gone. On her temple — a small, long-healed scar. Then she looked closer at her face and, with a slow, nauseating horror, realized that it was no longer symmetrical. The right side — the eyebrow, the corner of her mouth — was lowered just a little, maybe half a centimeter, as if the muscles on that side had forgotten how to smile.

She remembered the cold muzzle of the gun pressed to her right temple.

She had gotten drunk and dreamed. After all, she was alive — here she was, standing right in front of the mirror. Her body was not sinking in the murky water of the canal. Psychosomatic symptoms — that's what they called them in the psychology lectures at the academy. It appeared in victims of violence, in soldiers after the war. A brain that had endured unbearable trauma would create physical symptoms on its own: hysterical blindness, facial paralysis.

She ran her fingers along her asymmetrical face and touched the skin under the darkened eye. Just a glitch in her head. Convincing, terrifyingly real.

She looked at her reflection — at those strange, slightly alien eyes. The pain was gone. The guilt was gone. And in their place there were only these... symptoms. If this was the price for relief, for silence in her head, then so be it.

Eliza was willing to pay it.

Chapter 23. Natural Selection

The sharp, almost forgotten sound of a phone ringing shattered the silence of the empty apartment like an alarm.

Eliza, finally tearing herself away from her strange, alien reflection, walked out of the bathroom and picked up the phone. The screen lit up with a name: Miller. Her chief. Probably another interrogation.

"Dahmer."

"Liz," the captain's voice carried relief. "Good news. You know Dan came out of the coma a couple of days ago?"

Dan. 'After massive blood loss and surgery, he was placed in a medically induced coma to stabilize his condition' — that's what the doctor had told her. They hadn't let her into the ICU. She hadn't thought about him since.

"He gave his statement," Miller continued. "Fully confirmed your version. Armed assault, self-defense, all according to protocol. His testimony was the last thing the commission was waiting for. The internal investigation is closed, and all charges are dropped."

Staring at her reflection in the window, she remained silent.

"And one more thing..." the captain added. "Given his testimony and your bravery... you're being reinstated and transferred to Homicide. Honestly, I don't quite understand how this happened... Normally, with our bureaucracy, this would take ages. But... you're a detective now. Take today off, and tomorrow stop by the precinct for your new badge."

She had wanted to die. How absurd that seemed now.

The memories of the bridge — the cold pistol against her temple, the black, beckoning water of the canal — had finally dissolved. There was no broken woman anymore, no one who saw no other way out. She, Detective Eliza Dahmer, was alive.

She hadn't been given a second chance — she'd been handed a new game with new rules, and she was ready to cross any line to win it.

That girl... just a mistake. A statistical error. It happens.

This thought, once monstrous enough to make her sick, now sounded perfectly logical. This was war. Not the one news anchors scream about, but the real kind — the daily war against filth, violence, and crime devouring this city from within. And in war, there are always casualties. Collateral damage.

It wasn't her fault that the girl ended up in the line of fire. It wasn't her fault that the girl's parents chose to live in a neighborhood where drugs were sold and gunshots were just background noise. They made their choice. The girl was the result of that choice.

Which meant she had only herself to blame.

Natural selection. The strong survive, the weak perish. Frankie had been weak and stupid. The girl had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. And she, Eliza, had survived — had even grown stronger. So she had been right.

She looked at her own reflection, and the image of the smiling girl from the photograph — the one that had haunted her for weeks — dimmed, lost its clarity, dissolved into a meaningless smear. In its place emerged her own face — new, asymmetrical.

In the afternoon, she went to that same bridge on Seaport Boulevard. Despair was gone for good, leaving only resolve. The city lived its ordinary, noisy life; cars rushed past, people hurried along their routes. The world, hostile and alien just yesterday, had turned into a stage set.

In the middle of the bridge, she stopped, pulled the gun from her pocket — the one she had bought for that single purpose. The metal chilled her palm. She looked at it with a smirk, as if it were a relic from a past life that no longer belonged to her, a life that had belonged to another, weaker woman.

With a short, careless motion, she hurled it over the railing. The gun flashed in the sunlight and vanished into the water without leaving even a ripple. Her past no longer mattered to her.

In the evening, she stopped by a small, decent shop in South Boston and bought a bottle of Macallan — to properly celebrate her promotion. She'd be back. She would become the best detective in this city. She would prove to everyone that the rules are written by people like her.

She would go home, drink to her new life, and go to bed.

And she would dream.

She looked at her reflection — the new one, slightly asymmetrical, with one darkened pupil. A sudden, desperate urge struck her to see what lay beneath that skin. She raised a hand to her face, hooked a fingernail under the edge of the skin at her chin, and pulled upward.

The skin came off easily, like a thin mask, with a sticky, wet peeling sound. Beneath it there were no muscles, no bone. She peeled off the entire right half of her face, and it hung there, attached only at the hairline like a torn, blood-soaked rag.

The left half remained the same — human, frightened. But the right... the right had changed. Beneath the skin was dark, scaled flesh, shimmering like oil in a puddle. The eye socket was empty, but deep inside a small red light burned. From her forehead, erupting from the flesh, a black, curved horn slowly grew with a grinding crack.

Everything vanished, and she found herself in another dream.

She was riding in a sterile, white, silent elevator. Beside her stood a small girl of about seven, with two pale braids. Eliza recognized her — the child she had killed.

But the girl wasn't angry. She looked at Eliza with those glassy eyes and said calmly:

"Mom asked me to tell you it's time to begin. You have to meet with Damian Lanier."

Eliza said nothing; her body refused to obey her, paralyzed by terror and by the sheer unreality of what was happening.

"He has to transfer a hundred million to your account," the girl continued in the same flat, lifeless voice. "And he must establish a new company. For that, he will give you an entire floor in his tower. Mom says you know what to do next."

The elevator stopped, and the doors slid open without a sound. Beyond them lay a black, endless void.

"She's waiting," the girl whispered and stepped into the void, disappearing within it.

Eliza woke up in her bed. The pillow was wet with sweat. She jerked upright, breathing hard, and scanned the room. Morning sunlight — a rare

thing for Boston — seeped through the grimy windows. An empty bottle on the table, the sound of cars outside.

A dream. Another bad, drunken dream. Like the one yesterday.

Her head spun, and she swayed. The demonic face, the elevator, the dead girl-messenger... A mind poisoned by alcohol and guilt could produce far stranger visions. She walked into the kitchen to pour herself some water — and on the table lay a sheet torn from a notebook.

On it, in her own handwriting — slightly crooked from haste — were an address and a time:

Top of the Hub, Prudential Tower, 8:00 p.m.

She didn't remember writing it.

With an unpleasant feeling tightening in her chest, she went to the nightstand where her old Nokia lay and opened the call log. One outgoing call. Yesterday, at 9:11 p.m. — she'd already been asleep then. An unfamiliar number.

Her heart slammed against her ribs — once, twice — stumbling out of rhythm. Without thinking, she pressed "call." After the first ring, a calm, professional female voice answered:

"Lanier's reception."

Eliza said nothing, unsure what to say.

"Hello?" The voice on the other end remained polite, but insistent.

"I... I think I dialed the wrong number," Eliza muttered.

"One moment." There was a rustle of papers as the woman checked something. "Are you Detective Dahmer?"

Her lips, as if they belonged to someone else, answered for her.

"Yes."

"Everything is confirmed, Detective," the woman said. "Mr. Lanier will expect you today at eight. Do not be late."

The line cut off. Eliza lowered the phone.

Everything had fallen back into place — but at what cost? And was that cost even real?

She picked up the note from the table again. Her handwriting. A call she didn't remember making. Could it be some kind of sleepwalking episode? But sleepwalkers don't make phone calls arranging meetings with one of the most influential men in the world.

What was she supposed to trust — the nightmare or the waking world?

But she couldn't stay in that apartment any longer. She needed to push thoughts of Lanier aside. First — the precinct and the badge. She would cling to this new, gifted reality for as long as she possibly could.

The drive to the station was a mess. Traffic. The whole city seemed stuck on I-93. The car jerked forward a meter at a time, horns blaring all around. A typical bleak, irritating morning.

Eliza sat there, her foot pressing the brake pedal to the floor, feeling a dull, helpless anger simmering inside her. She had just gotten her life back, and now she was forced to sit in this metal box because of hundreds of other people who also needed to get somewhere. She squeezed her eyes shut and imagined an empty road. Clear. So she could drive without stopping.

When she opened her eyes, everything had changed.

The traffic was gone. The cars that had been packed bumper-to-bumper in front of her had vanished. The road ahead was completely empty, the roar of horns replaced by silence.

Her heart leapt to her throat, beating hard enough to choke her. The rearview mirror showed nothing. Someone had carved out a piece of reality and left a clear corridor just for her.

She had done this. She didn't know how — but she knew it came from her. From her desire.

She suddenly remembered those ridiculous books her mother sometimes brought home. Bright, tacky covers with titles like *Tell the Universe Your Wish and It Will Hear You* or *Quantum Physics for Manifesting Your Dreams.* Nonsense for desperate housewives.

She had always laughed at them. But after what had just happened — she pictured an empty road, and the road cleared.

So the world wasn't a hard, fixed thing. It was more like... clay. And she had left her handprint on it.

The thought was more terrifying than any nightmare, yet at the same time it gave her a sweet, dizzying rush of power.

She stepped on the gas. The car rolled forward, gliding down her own personal road, free of everyone else. Eliza drove, her mind completely blank. She wasn't thinking about the past or the future. Only the empty street ahead and the steady hum of the engine.

The city was dead.

It wasn't a slow realization — it hit her suddenly, undeniably. The cars were gone. The noise of the city had vanished. The sidewalks were empty. All the buildings — offices, shops, apartment blocks — watched her with black, hollow windows.

She was driving through an utterly empty, dead Boston.

Soon she saw her. Ahead, in the middle of the empty road, walked a lone figure. A little girl of about seven, with two pale braids, wearing a simple white dress.

Eliza hit the brakes, stopping a few yards away. The girl turned, lifted her hand, and pointed somewhere past Eliza's shoulder, toward the downtown skyline. Eliza understood immediately — she was pointing at Lanier Tower.

And in the next heartbeat, the world snapped back.

The city came alive again. Cars reappeared around her, and the driver behind her honked angrily. Eliza flinched — the girl was gone.

But she was already close. Only a couple of blocks left.

She walked into the precinct, and the world that had been closed to her yesterday opened its doors again. Buzzing lights, the smell of coffee, familiar faces. Now she looked at it all differently.

"Detective Dahmer." Captain Miller stepped up to her and shook her hand firmly. "Welcome back. We're glad everything was resolved."

The other cops — the same ones who avoided her yesterday — came up to her now, patting her shoulder, smiling.

"Listen, Liz, congratulations on the promotion!"

"Good job not letting him get away."

Not a word about the girl.

Fake, friendly faces, words, smiles. She accepted their congratulations, nodded politely, even tried to smile back. Yesterday they saw her as a problem, a killer. Today — she was a hero. What had changed? The girl hadn't come back to life. Time hadn't rewound.

Nothing had changed except for one piece of paper. A piece of paper — that was what controlled them.

Someone up there, in an important office, had signed a report. And that signature changed their reality. The paper gave them a command. Yesterday, the command was "ignore." Today — "congratulate."

So it wasn't about the fact that she had killed a child. Not about morality, not about justice. It was about the system that ordered them to obey. The system says "turn away" — and they turn away. The system says "smile" — and they smile.

They weren't people but slaves.

All of them — her colleagues, the captain, the woman who had cursed her — lived inside a cage built from someone else's rules. Their "good" and "evil" weren't their own choices. They were instructions handed to them. They condemned her not because they thought her action was wrong, but because they were told to think so. They praised her not because they believed she was a hero, but because a new order had arrived.

Slaves to morality, to the code, to fear of the system.

And she? She had stepped over guilt, morality, and the law. She had paid the price for her freedom and now stood on the other side. No longer a cog in their mechanism, she finally belonged to herself.

And with that realization came an endless loneliness — and an endless weightlessness.

She had to spend the day drowning in paperwork.

Eliza received her new badge — shiny, heavy, engraved with "Detective." Then she gathered her few belongings from the old patrol locker and moved them into her new office. Calling it an office was generous — it was more like a glass-partitioned corner in the noisy, humming beehive of Homicide. But it was *her* place.

The bureaucracy began. New access protocols. A briefing on database procedures. Dozens of digital and paper forms she had to fill out. She sat at her new desk, mechanically typing in data, listening to the hum of voices and the chirping of communicators, and felt like an actress playing the role of Detective Dahmer.

None of it was real. It was just a set piece.

The dream was real. The asymmetrical face in the mirror was real. The address and time on the note were real.

She knew she would go to that meeting with Lanier. More than that — she wanted to go. This whole world — the precinct, the colleagues, the protocols — was a cage they'd briefly opened for her, only to lock her back inside, repainting the bars. The meeting with Lanier, the command from... the Mother — that was the way out. The real way.

Night awaited her.

Chapter 24. I Make Sure the Blood Flows

The day dragged on like an endless patrol shift. The precinct buzzed: lamps rattled like overstretched nerves, the smell of spilled coffee mixed with sweat and cheap cologne. Eliza sat at her desk, and the glass partition separated her from the noise, but not from the feeling that she was playing a role. Detective Dahmer: a shiny badge, a new database password, a stack of forms. Signatures, questionnaires — a life that wasn't hers, one imposed by the system. She ticked boxes, filled in her name, badge number, but her thoughts were far beyond this hive.

Lanier. Who was he?

On her work computer — humming like an old fan — she opened the BPD database. Access resources: LexisNexis, articles from the *Boston Globe*, *Financial Times*, CNBC archives.

She typed: "Damian Lanier." The screen blinked, spitting out dozens of links.

Born in France in the 1960s. Paris, then Harvard — economics, MBA. In the '80s, he was a trader in London, a shark of the currency markets. In the '90s, he founded Lanier Global Strategies, a hedge fund that made billions during the 1997 Asian crisis and the 2008 housing collapse.

Of course. He got rich on other people's suffering. Crashing currencies, foreclosed homes, families out on the street. For him — numbers. For them — death. A good strategist.

In 2010, Lanier became "an architect of the new economy," according to CNBC. He launched a digital start-up in Seaport, near South Station. Articles boasted about philanthropy: children's hospitals, cancer research grants. But that was ritual — payment for an image, like the mafia donating to a church.

The system. He was its slave, like all the rest. But not Eliza.

The cold in her right cheek grew stronger — as if her face knew more than her conscious mind.

Yesterday's dream — the girl, the elevator, "Mother is waiting" — flashed through her memory. Something burned in her palm, and she knew it was a reminder.

By the end of the day, she submitted the last form, shut down the computer, and left the precinct. It had started to rain, and the smell of rust from Fort Point mingled with the exhaust from I-93.

The meeting with Lanier was at eight. She needed a dress.

On Congress Street, just a few steps from her bar, she found a little shop called Southie Styles, its sign flickering with dull neon. In the window — tailored suits, simple dresses; inside it smelled of dust and cheap perfume. The clerk — young, with a brow piercing — nodded: "For a special occasion?"

Eliza chose a dark dress, with no decorations, as strict as her new badge. In the fitting room, the mirror reflected a woman she didn't recognize, dressed like someone from a movie. She touched her cheek and her temple. Not a cop. Not a would-be suicide. Who?

Then a taxi carried her toward downtown, through the rainy city. Rain hammered the roof, horns blared along Seaport Boulevard. Eliza sat in the back, the silk of the dress cooling her skin, the Nokia in her purse vibrating with an incoming call from the same number as yesterday. The mark on her palm warmed her skin.

Top of the Hub on the 52nd floor of the Prudential Tower was luxurious: panoramic windows, a view of Boston — the lights of Back Bay, the dark gulf of the channel. The smell of whiskey and steaks, the clink of glasses, the whisper of wealthy guests. Eliza entered, her dress dark as night, her detective badge an anchor of reality. A waiter guided her to a table by the window. Lanier was already waiting.

He looked younger than he did in the Financial Times photos — maybe fifty, hair streaked with gray and an Armani suit perfectly fitted. His eyes were green. His smile was as cold as the tower's glass.

"Detective Dahmer." His voice was soft, tinged with a French accent, but carried the firmness of a trader used to dealing in billions. "You are

punctual. And I must say, that dress suits you. I wouldn't have expected a cop to look elegant in something so cheap."

A compliment sliding into an insult — an art form. A good way to show who's in charge.

Eliza felt no sting of offense, no embarrassment. She merely noted, with detached curiosity, how predictable the rituals of this world were. He tried to judge her by the price tag on the dress, because price was the only truth he understood. A slave to money.

She sat down in the chair he offered without the slightest sign of unease.

"Thank you," she replied, her voice steady. "I'm not here for compliments or for an evaluation of my wardrobe."

She saw his essence: not a villain, not a sadist. A wife, two sons — the Forbes photos, the yacht, the smiles. He loved them, sincerely. But he was a slave, just like the cops in the BPD, just like Miller with his paperwork. A man who prospered thanks to... something dark he himself didn't understand.

Eliza didn't see the architect of a new economy — she saw a boy who once decided to play with darkness. How? She didn't know. Lanier smiled, gesturing for the waiter.

"Of course. Let's make this evening pleasant." He opened the menu, the leather cover creaking. "To start — Glenfiddich, eighteen years, two glasses. And a ribeye steak, medium, for both of us."

"One moment," the waiter said with a nod, and vanished into the restaurant's hum. Lanier leaned back, studying Eliza; his eyes sweeping over her like a scanner.

"Now then, Detective, let's get to business. Why are the police interested in me?"

The waiter returned, moving soundlessly with an unnatural grace. He set down two heavy glasses, poured the amber liquid. The smell of single malt — peat, smoke, wood — briefly overpowered the sterile scent of money.

Eliza picked up her glass; her fingers felt the pleasant chill of the crystal. She took a small sip, letting the drink burn her throat, and looked Lanier straight in the eyes.

"The police aren't interested in you," she said calmly. "I'm not here as a police officer."

Lanier froze for a moment; his polite smile didn't shift, but a shard of ice flashed in his green eyes. He had expected anything — interrogation, threats — but not this.

"Then as what, exactly?" His voice stayed smooth, but the softness was gone.

"As a messenger," Eliza replied, setting her glass on the table. "I'm here to deliver an order. You will transfer one hundred million to an anonymous account. You'll immediately begin setting up a new subsidiary under my control. Allocate one floor in this tower for its needs. For example... the thirteenth. I like the number thirteen."

She said it as casually as if she were reading a grocery list. Lanier laughed in her face. A quiet, almost hissing laugh.

"Detective," he muttered, taking a sip of Scotch. "I appreciate your courage and sense of humor. May I ask — who sent you? And why, exactly, should I hand you a hundred million and an entire floor of my tower? Mon dieu, I really should have checked your file myself. You don't need a meeting with me — you need a psychiatrist."

Not a single muscle on her face twitched. She simply watched him savor his sense of superiority. The mark on her palm pulsed; heat rose along her veins. She saw his contract — not a signed paper, but a shadow woven into him, the guide that led him into the dark. Thirty years ago, London, the eighties. A tiny flat, rain on the window, the smell of damp and cheap beer. Lanier — young, desperate, a broker on the edge of collapse. He didn't sign a contract or pray to God. He challenged the void: give me everything. And the void answered. It gave him wealth, power, a family.

"It seems you're forgetting, Lanier, whom you owe everything to," she said quietly, her gaze darkening like the water at Fort Point.

Her words hung in the air. Lanier stopped smiling. His green eyes narrowed, the glass froze in his hand. The thread binding him to the darkness pulsed brighter, and Eliza saw it: London, rain, his plea into the void. He thought it was a prayer — but it was a pact.

"Back then, in London," she continued, staring straight at him, "you made a deal with us. You asked for wealth and power, and you received exactly what you wanted. Now it's time to pay your dues."

Silence. Glasses clinked somewhere at the next table, rain drummed against the panoramic windows. Lanier set down his whisky; for a moment his face froze like a cast, and then instantly returned to its usual polite expression.

"I have no idea what you're talking about, Detective Dahmer," he said. "If you wish, I can give you the number of my personal doctor, and he can examine you. Right here in the tower. Everything here belongs to me. As long as your superiors don't find out. Otherwise... how does it work for you? Suspension, termination?"

Eliza didn't react to the threat. She took another small sip, looking at him through the whisky — his face warped in the warm glass.

"My superiors?" she said with a smirk. "That's adorable."

Then she set the glass down.

"Let me refresh your memory, Mr. Lanier. You were sitting in the dark because they cut off your electricity for non-payment. And you said... let me see if I remember it right," Eliza continued calmly, but every word hit him sharp and merciless. "'I'll give anything, just give me a chance. One chance to bring this world to its knees.' I don't think I missed anything. We have it all recorded."

She leaned toward him across the table.

"We heard you," she whispered. "We gave you that chance. Now it's time to settle your debt."

His politeness proved to be nothing but a mask, and it slipped at once, revealing raw fury. A murky green flame flashed in his eyes.

"You're lying!" he hissed, his soft accent gone, replaced by a harsh, guttural growl. "Every detail is a lie! A pathetic attempt at blackmail built on rumors and fantasies. You made all of this up, you... stupid whore!"

He shot to his feet, the chair scraping backward with a loud creak.

"I'm a financier. I have a nose for money, for the weaknesses of this world. I never needed anyone to rise. I owe everything to myself alone!"

He clenched his fists; his immaculate suit suddenly seemed too tight, strained by his rage, and he was gasping for breath.

"Money is the blood of the modern world. I make sure that blood flows where it's needed. That is my philosophy. And you... You are nothing. A washed-up cop with issues who got lucky enough to get a detective's badge. And tomorrow I'll prove it to you. Tomorrow morning, you'll be no one."

He pushed the glass aside, spilling whisky.

"Security!" he called, louder than necessary.

The restaurant fell silent. Two burly men rose from the neighboring table and approached them.

Eliza slowly, deliberately finished her whisky and set the empty glass on the table. She stood up, gently pushed the chair back in.

"When you change your mind," she said, "my number is registered with your secretary. You'll have plenty of time to think it over."

She turned and walked toward the exit without looking back. The guards stepped aside, not daring to touch her. Eliza walked through the luxurious, brightly lit restaurant, and behind her trailed an aura of power far older and far more terrifying than all of Damian Lanier's billions.

She already knew how she would take her revenge on him.

Intermission 7. Damian

When the elevator doors closed behind her without a sound, Damian still stood frozen in the same pose in the middle of the luxurious, hushed restaurant. He restored his familiar mask of composure. Then, with the same precision with which he crushed currencies, he took his glass of eighteen-year-old whisky and crushed it in his fist.

Crystal bit into his palm, amber liquid mixed with blood, dripping onto the pristine white tablecloth. The waiters and security guards froze, afraid to move. Ignoring them, he turned and walked toward his private elevator, leaving behind a trail of tiny sparkling shards and dark droplets on the floor.

He ascended to the penthouse, to his office — a sanctuary of glass, steel, and leather. From here, at the top of the world, Boston looked like a map, a collection of assets he controlled. He approached the panoramic window.

Nonsense. Blackmail. A psychopath who'd stumbled onto some rumors.

He'd built himself. Asset by asset. Deal by deal. He was smarter, faster, more ruthless than all of them. Without breaking the law — he used it. He saw how fear and greed governed the world, and he directed those currents where he needed them. He didn't create catastrophes; he was simply the only one prepared for them. *"Money is the blood of the modern world. I make sure that blood flows where it's needed."* Those were his words. His truth.

And she... she was nothing now but a former cop, a nobody. She wouldn't be hired even as a waitress — he'd make sure of that.

But her quiet, assured voice echoed in his head, piercing through the wall of Harvard logic.

London, eighty-seven. A dingy flat in Islington.

Memories he hadn't touched in thirty years surfaced with nauseating, sickening clarity. The smell of damp and coal. Cold. Darkness — no money

for utilities. And he, Damian Lanier — not a master of the world but a broke, ruined broker — was sitting on the floor, staring at numbers that had wiped out everything he had. And he remembered how, in utter despair, he had said: "I'll give anything. Just give me one chance, one chance to bring this world to its knees."

She knew.

But she couldn't possibly know that. It was impossible. That evening in Islington had been left behind with the broke young broker he'd been thirty years ago. No records, no witnesses. Nothing.

So she guessed. Invented it.

In some book about interrogation techniques, he'd read about induced memories — he thought that's what it was called. You feed someone a detail, a phrase, and their own mind obligingly builds the rest, accepting your fabrication as their own long-forgotten memory.

Of course. He hadn't said those words back then. "Bring this world to its knees." What a vulgar melodrama! Some cardboard villain out of a movie.

No. He'd said something else — more mundane, desperate. And now, after she had voiced his alleged thoughts — these theatrical, almost biblical phrases — he found himself recalling them in her wording.

It had been manipulation. Very artful, very precise — but nothing more than manipulation. She'd found his weak spot and struck it. Mastery — impeccable. Even he, three times her age, had believed it and lost his temper. But worse for her. People like that are best nipped in the bud.

His bloodied hand throbbed, but it was nothing serious — just a couple of cuts. He needed to control himself better. This wouldn't happen again. He was Damian Lanier. And she was a clever, dangerous woman who overplayed her hand today, and tomorrow she would be put in her place.

At that moment, the desk phone rang — not the sharp business tone, but a soft, melodic chime. On the screen, the name "Lucy" flashed. Damian froze for a second, pressed a napkin to the wound, and answered the call. His face changed instantly. The rage vanished, replaced by tenderness.

"Yes, darling," he said in a tone with no trace of anger left.

"Will you be home soon?" came a quiet female voice through the speaker. "The boys won't go to bed, they're waiting for you. Pierre says you promised to finish the story for him."

The clock on the wall read 9:11 p.m. He was late today.

"Yes, of course, darling. I'm leaving now," he said. "Kiss John for me. Tell them Daddy will be home in half an hour."

He ended the call, and the half-darkness of the office froze around him, pressing down. He walked to the window and looked out over the lights of the City. Down there, in another house, warm and real, his family was waiting for him. His sons, Pierre and John. Everything he had built. Everything he had to protect. For them, he was ready to bring more than one world to its knees.

He pressed the intercom.

"Bring the car to the entrance. I'm going home."

The car slid noiselessly along the night highway, carrying him away from the shining center into the quiet, respectable suburbs of the City. He was going to Weston — an enclave for those who had won in life. Here, behind tall fences and manicured hedges, slept people whose fortunes rivaled the budgets of small countries.

The road sank into darkness, the city lights left behind. He thought about Dahmer's words. Nonsense. Manipulation. He would crush her. Tomorrow. The police chief would grovel before him. *"Yes, of course, Mr. Lanier! We'll resolve this matter immediately."*

The car turned toward the gates. The tall wrought-iron gates slid apart without a sound, letting him through. The car rolled over the gravel.

Damian frowned. No guards at the entrance. Martin always greeted him personally.

A sharp pang flashed in his chest.

He entered the house. Silence. A tense, wrong silence. No sound from the TV, no children's laughter.

"Lucy?" he called. His voice sounded too loud in that stillness.

No answer.

The living room was untouched, everything in its place, perfect order. But on the floor, near the staircase leading to the second floor, lay a plush

bear. John's favorite toy. And next to it, on the pale carpet, a spreading dark stain.

Damian rushed to the staircase. On the marble steps, lying in a pool of blood, was Maria, their housekeeper. He leapt over her body without stopping. Flying upstairs, he ran down the hallway. He tore the bedroom door open — and what he saw burned him from the inside out.

The room — their room, warm, with cream wallpaper and the soft light of a floor lamp — had become a slaughterhouse. Lucy lay by the bed, her blonde hair, always neatly arranged, now splayed across the floor, soaked in blood, black as oil. Her pajamas, blue, expensive silk, were torn across the chest, where three precise wounds gaped. Beside her — Pierre, small, fragile, curled at her feet as if trying to hide. His dinosaur pajamas, the ones he wore despite his brother's teasing, were dark with blood. A bullet had left a small dark hole in his forehead, from which a thin trickle had run, already drying into a brown crust on his pale skin.

John lay a little farther away, near the window, his body frozen in an unnatural, broken pose. His throat was cut — a deep, ragged slice, blood pooling on the carpet, seeping down into the oak floorboards beneath. The smell of iron and moisture — thick, suffocating.

The bed was splattered with blood. On the floor — signs of a struggle: an overturned nightstand, shards of glass, a Harry Potter book lying open in the middle. An unfamiliar gun — black, heavy — lay near Lucy. Her fingers touched it but did not hold it.

Damian's legs gave out. His knees hit the floor; pain shot through them, but he didn't notice. His heart hammered like a mallet, a roar filled his ears, drowning out his ragged breathing. Blood pulsed at his temples, each beat thudding in his chest as if someone were pounding from the inside.

Then nausea surged, the sour taste of bile mixing with the metallic scent of blood hanging in the air. His skin burned, sweat trickled down his temples, cold and sticky, mixing with the blood from his own hand, where shards of crystal had left jagged cuts.

He picked up the gun for some reason, as if that could help. His breath tore out of his chest, his lungs compressed, every breath like a knife — short, rasping. His stomach clenched into a tight knot. He sat down on

the edge of the bed beside Lucy, careful not to step on her hair. His shoes squelched in the blood.

He had no sense of how long he sat like that. A few minutes? An hour? Time stopped existing, collapsing into one point — this blood-soaked room.

Then came a sound. At first distant, like an echo — the wail of sirens. Then closer — the pounding of heavy boots on the stairs, muffled, tense voices. None of it mattered. It was happening somewhere in another world, beyond the borders of this hell.

The footsteps stopped at the door, and two figures entered the room cautiously. Police uniforms, weapons drawn.

"Police! Drop the weapon!" shouted one of them. His voice was young, trembling with adrenaline and terror. The officer — barely more than a boy — looked from Damian to the children's bodies, and his face, under the brim of his cap, turned deathly pale. "Weapon on the floor!"

The second officer, older, also kept Damian in his sights; there was trained precision in his movements.

"Hands up! Slowly!" he barked. "Don't move!"

Damian didn't understand what they wanted. He stared at them — at their weapons trained on him, their faces twisted with alarm. His brain refused to process their words. A weapon. For some reason, his hand was holding a gun. He didn't remember picking it up.

"I repeat, drop the weapon!" the young cop shouted again, his voice cracking into a shriek. "Hands up!"

Slowly, as if in a dream, Damian raised the hand holding the gun.

And the young officer fired.

The blast stunned him; Damian felt not the pain but a sharp, brutal impact to the chest that knocked him off the bed and onto the floor. He fell beside Lucy. The gun slipped from his hand.

The world blurred, dissolving into a dark, murky smear. The last thing he saw was his wife's face, so close, so familiar. He reached for her; his blood-soaked fingers brushed her cold cheek.

The void swallowed everything.

And the call tore it apart.

A sharp, melodic chime from his desk phone. On the screen — a name: "Lucy."

Damian stared around in shock.

His own office, in the penthouse at the top of the world. His palm still throbbed from the shattered glass. Outside, nighttime Boston glittered.

The clock read 9:11 p.m.

A dream. A vision. A hallucination brought on by stress, alcohol, and that insane conversation. He lifted his bloodied hand, pressed a napkin to it. The pain was real. But everything else... no. It couldn't be.

Swaying, he pressed the answer button.

"Yes, darling," he said, his voice coming out hoarse and unfamiliar.

"Are you on your way?" came the soft female voice from the speaker. "The boys won't go to bed, they're waiting for you. Pierre says you promised to finish his story."

Damian could still see Pierre's face, his dinosaur pajamas, the tiny black hole in his forehead. It was a dream. It had to be a dream.

"Yes, of course, sweetheart. I'm leaving now," he said. "Kiss John for me. Tell them Dad will be home in half an hour."

With a trembling finger, he pressed the intercom button.

The drive home became a pilgrimage to the site of his own execution. Every turn, every familiar streetlight on the road to Weston, was a step deeper into the vision that had scorched his soul in that bedroom. He clung desperately to the idea that it was a dream, a hallucination brought on by stress. But that was a lie.

The car turned toward his gates. They were open, no guard in sight. The first sign.

A sharp pang twisted in his chest. He entered the house. Silence. A tense, wrong kind of silence.

"Lucy?" he called, and his voice sounded weak, rasping. No answer. The second coincidence.

He stepped into the living room. On the floor, by the staircase leading to the second floor, lay John's plush bear. Beside it, on the pale carpet, a dark stain spread.

The third.

Slowly, like a condemned man, he began to climb the stairs, already knowing what he would see. On the pristine white steps lay Maria, their housekeeper, curled in a pool of blood. He didn't leap over her this time — he carefully stepped around the body, afraid to disturb the order of this horrific, predetermined scene.

He approached the door to their bedroom, placed his hand on the handle and pressed down.

Everything was in its place. Every object, every drop of blood, was exactly where he had already seen it.

Damian stepped inside, and his legs did not give way. The shock had passed; panic was gone. In their place — an endless, icy emptiness. He was no longer a player, but a piece on a board moved by an unseen hand.

Staggering, Damian walked to his wife. He knelt down, careful not to step on her hair, reached out a trembling hand and touched her cheek. Ice-cold. Real.

And then his world collapsed again. Damian Lanier's rational world — built on logic and control — erupted from within, leaving behind raw, primal terror. He did not scream. His mouth opened, and a strangled, soundless moan forced its way out. He looked at his wife's body, at the gun lying beside her, but he didn't touch it.

He sat on the floor — minutes, an hour; he didn't know.

Then came the noise. Sirens. The heavy stomp of boots on the stairs. Two officers burst into the room: police uniforms, weapons drawn.

"Down on the floor, face down! Hands behind your head, now!" one of them shouted. The voice was young, shaking with adrenaline and horror. A police officer — barely more than a boy. "On the floor! Hands behind your head! I said hands behind your head! Keep your hands where I can see them!"

Damian didn't understand what they wanted. He stared at them, at the weapons pointed at him. His mind refused to process the words.

"Hands behind your head! Immediately!" the young cop screamed again, his voice cracking into a shrill, panicked shriek.

Damian awkwardly lifted his blood-covered hand to place it behind his head.

At that moment, the young officer's gaze darted to the black pistol lying on the floor just a couple of feet from Damian.

"Gun!" he shouted.

And he fired.

The blast deafened him, and Damian didn't feel pain — only a sudden, brutal impact to the chest that hurled him to the floor. He fell beside Lucy. The world dissolved into a dark, blurry smear. The last thing he saw was his wife's face, so close and familiar. He reached toward her, his bloodied fingers brushing her cooling cheek.

The void swallowed him — and then he heard the sharp chime of the phone.

Chapter 25. And Name It Something Simpler

Elizazdra wasn't sleeping. She was playing.

After that night — the night the darkness of the empty store in Carver Falls swallowed her whole — she had woken up different. Sleep had become her kingdom, a chessboard where every piece moved according to her will. Boston, with its rain-soaked streets, rust-bitten docks, and neon signs trembling over black puddles, was now her canvas. She could be anyone: a cop, a victim, a killer, even the City itself. She could feel asphalt drinking in blood, rain washing tracks away, streetlights flickering in time with her pulse.

In her South Boston apartment, the darkness was torn apart by neon crawling through the window while she sat motionless. Heat seeped into her veins; her right cheek had gone numb, smooth as marble, and her right eye was entirely black — as if it had swallowed the darkness of the canal outside. Her heartbeat stayed steady, but inside her — a rising, molten wave, almost orgasmic in its sense of power.

She was the wine glass in Lanier's penthouse; she was Lucy, drowning in panic before the kill. Maria, twisting as the knife tore into her back. Pierre, staring down a gun barrel in mute confusion. The house itself, soaking up their blood into its carpets, smothering dying moans.

She flipped between them like TV channels, savoring their fear, their pain, their last thoughts. Replaying the scene again and again, changing the details: the angle of the shot, the color of Pierre's pajamas, the sound of Lanier's footsteps. It was her game, her symphony, where every note was somebody's death. The mark on her palm burned; her skin cracked; blood dripped onto the floor, hot and metallic. She smiled with dry lips, feeling her own heart beat in time with that symphony of death.

So when the phone rang, Eliza already knew who was calling.

The Nokia vibrated across the table. "Unknown number." But she knew — it was Lanier. Or whatever remained of him.

"Send a car for me," she ordered.

Inside her — triumph, sharp and hot as a knife in the throat.

Late at night, the black Lincoln slid through Boston, rain whipping against the windshield, puddles catching the neon — "Liquor Store" and "24/7 Diner" blinked like beacons. Inside the car, the smell of leather lingered — flesh that had survived a murder. The driver stayed silent, his face in the rearview mirror wearing a faint smile, as if he knew. She knew: he was part of her game too.

At the Prudential Tower, on the 52nd floor, Lanier met her. His eyes were bloodshot from a sleepless night and sheer terror, his chin trembling, his fingers worrying at the button of his jacket, still stained with blood. The tremor of his endless nightmare still in him.

Eliza savored it in silence. What remained of Lanier was just an empty shell — a shadow of the magnate she'd seen once at Top of the Hub. She stepped closer, her heels striking the parquet like a metronome. The mark burned, blood pounded, her heart thundered — and her smile stayed merciless.

"Did you want to apologize?" she asked sweetly. "For the unpleasant scene you caused me at the restaurant? You behaved very rudely."

Lanier backed up, his spine hitting the wall; sweat streamed from his temples, and the sour, animal smell of fear filled the air.

"Well, Damian," Eliza continued, her tone unchanged, "did you enjoy it? I even took pity on you — your wife wasn't assaulted."

His voice shattered like crystal.

"You... you did this, you—"

Eliza tilted her head; the azure eye flashed, the black one swallowed the light.

"Not me," she cut him off. "*You.* You asked for a chance — and you were given one. But you refused to pay. You're getting exactly what you deserve."

Lanier collapsed to his knees. Blood from his palm was soaking into the carpet, thick and dark.

"What is this? Hallucinogens? Poison?" he groaned, his voice pathetic. "You'll answer for this!"

Two massive figures stepped forward from the darkness of the office. Damian, it seemed, still wasn't done fighting.

"Oh, so you're still thrashing around," Eliza said with a smile.

She wasn't looking at the guards. She was looking at Lanier.

But the shadows in the corners of the room had begun to move.

Two snakes. Thin, black, almost invisible against the dark carpet. They slid across the floor without a sound, like streaks of ink, rushing toward the guards.

One of the men froze mid-step. A slick black coil wrapped around his boot and climbed up his pant leg. He didn't even have time to scream. The snake struck — a short, almost lazy jab — sinking its fangs into his thigh right through the fabric.

The man choked, his eyes rolled back, and he collapsed in convulsions. Foam bubbled out of his mouth.

The second guard spun, reaching for his weapon, but the snake was already on him. It coiled around his arm; he yelped in pain and disgust, trying to fling it off. The snake sank its fangs into his neck, and the scream broke off into a wet, drowning gurgle. He fell beside his partner.

It was over.

Eliza didn't even glance at the bodies. The snakes dissolved back into the shadows as silently as they'd appeared.

"I will no longer tolerate your little antics, Damian," she said, enunciating each word like a schoolteacher scolding an unruly child. "That was the last time."

She stepped toward him — and with each step, her body began to change.

The right side of her face melted like wax, revealing dark, scaled flesh beneath. Her right eye, black and bottomless, glowed from the inside like a smoldering coal. From under her hair, on the right side, a long black horn forced its way out with a dry, cracking sound. Her delicate hands elongated, and her nails sharpened into glossy onyx claws.

She loomed over him — half the woman he'd seen in the restaurant, half the monster from his worst nightmare.

And she smiled at him with both halves of her face.

"You killed them yourself, Damian," she remarked. "I warned you, and you didn't listen. Now Mike's kids will never see daddy come home, and Ben won't get to screw two chicks at once — which, as you know, he *loved* to do."

Lanier stared at her new, monstrous face — half human, half demonic. His whole world, built on logic, control, and contempt for weakness, crumbled into dust.

And now the weak one was him.

All his self-justifications and rational explanations — "psychotropics," "implanted memories," "blackmail" — fell away.

He had been lying to himself. All this time.

His words back then, in that dark, cold basement in London, had not been empty sounds thrown into the void. They had been heard by the one who listens. And he had always known that. Somewhere deep inside, beneath layers of wealth, power, and cultivated cynicism, he had remembered. Years had passed, and he'd convinced himself it was a dream — a bad memory he could bury under the weight of his success.

But his debt had come for him in the flesh. With horns, with claws, with eyes containing nothing but darkness.

He managed to get to his feet only with effort. His immaculate suit was crumpled, his knees smeared with blood. He looked at the creature calling itself Eliza Dahmer, and his rage and fear drained away. His shoulders sagged, and he bowed his head.

"I'm sorry," he whispered — and that word became the end of his former world and the beginning of the absolute horror of servitude.

"Transfer a hundred million. Today," Eliza said, as if reciting an order at a restaurant. "An entire floor in this tower. A private elevator. Personal security. And a new startup."

Damian tried desperately to rebuild his mask of control, the polished confidence of a financier. His fingers trembled, but he lifted his chin, trying to imitate his former authority.

"And... what startup?" he asked hoarsely.

He walked to the table and poured himself a whiskey, the bottle clinking against the glass. His face stared back at him in the amber liquid — distorted, aged by a single night.

"Right now, all the profit is in Tech. Consulting, data analysis, artificial intelligence... a very promising direction. I know the market, I—"

At that moment, the desk phone rang. The screen lit up, displaying a name:

"Lucy."

Lanier froze. For several seconds, he stared at the screen as if reading a verdict passed against him. Then he slowly lifted his gaze to Eliza. Only the swollen vein on his temple betrayed how much effort it took to maintain that thin façade of calm.

He pressed the button, silencing the call; the ringing dissolved into a silent flicker on the display. The room filled with the sound of rain behind the windows.

"No," Eliza said — the word dull and heavy, like a gunshot. "Biotechnology."

"But it isn't profitable," Lanier objected. A last, pitiful protest from his old self — a dying spark of the instinct to argue and convince. "The market is oversaturated, research takes decades, regulators—"

"Bio-tech-nol-o-gy," Eliza repeated, her voice sharp, distinct, mercilessly firm.

He nodded — a slow, weighted gesture that cost him everything. The mask of success had completely fallen away. Nothing was left but a wretched man whose wealth, connections, and cold calculation had turned to dust overnight.

Eliza leaned forward slightly.

"You'd better pull yourself together, Damian. We have a great deal of work to do."

Her smile was mocking, as though nothing had happened.

"Name our company something simpler, without the pomp and theatrics. Let's say... Biotechnology Incorporated. Or even shorter — BioTech.

Chapter 26. Secure Channel

Mark stared at his own face on the holo — distorted, ominous. They broadcast it every thirty minutes, as regularly as a weather report, announcing a search and a reward.

Maybe he was still hoping they would announce that it had all been some monstrous mistake the next time. There was nothing else he could do.

Panic rose in him, threatening to drown him. He was trapped. Not only framed — the whole world had become a prison. His enemy had been the City, but now, with a bounty posted, even the entire Ring had turned into a hunting ground for Mark Kane.

What now? Run to another City? They would find him anywhere. The Contour saw everything.

He replayed the events in Silas's house in his mind. The rage. The shift. The gunshots. The wristband.

Which meant there was a video record.

"System," he said, and his own voice sounded alien to him. "Local logs. Show the last video capture. Stabilize image."

The cuff projected a small holo in front of him. The same scene, but shot from his perspective. Borg bursting into the room. The borg fired first; a bullet tore into Mark's shoulder. And Mark shifting the gun into his left hand and firing back. Self-defense. Clear and indisputable. Evidence.

But how could he deliver the footage to the authorities? How could he prove his innocence when the entire system existed only to erase him? He couldn't send the file to the police. The police didn't care; it wasn't their job — it was the Center's. They would wipe the recording and locate him instantly. And he couldn't contact the Center directly. Would the Center intercept his message? No way to know. The Contour decided such things.

He needed someone inside the system who'd actually hear him out.

There was only one person — Diana. She had broken into the Center; she was part of the very system he hated. But she knew him, and they had been through too much together. Maybe something of the woman he once knew still remained in her. It was a desperate, insane option — but the only one he had.

Mari watched him from her chair, silent, her book set aside.

"I need to make a call," he said, as if asking permission.

"All right," Mari said with a small smile — and in that smile there was neither surprise nor question.

"Cuff. Secure channel. Search the archive. Diana... Detective Diana Wells."

The cuff froze for a moment, processing the request. He wasn't sure the contact even existed anymore after he'd been erased from the system. But then a green light blinked, and a purr of the ringback sounded.

The call rang for so long that Mari had time to turn a page. Mark was about to disconnect when a click came from the other end.

"Mark?" Diana's voice carried unfiltered astonishment. "What the hell? Where are you calling from? Your identifier isn't recognized, but the biometrics— that's you. There's no geotag."

"I... I'm in the Ring," he said. "I need your help. It's important."

"The Ring..." she repeated, her voice edged with worry. "What are you doing there? Mark, what happened?"

"They pinned a murder on me. I'm wanted."

"I know," she said. "I saw the broadcasts. The whole City saw. And it was... strange. It's nothing like you, not even at your worst. Were you drunk?"

For the first time this endless day, the tension in his chest loosened a little. She probably didn't believe him — but she hadn't hung up.

"It's fabricated. I have proof, a recording. He fired first. I need to show it to you."

Another silence. He could almost feel Diana, in her sterile, gleaming office, weighing risks. Helping a fugitive — a former colleague and lover — could cost her everything.

"... All right," she finally said, having made her decision. "But everything happens on my terms. No dark alleys in the Ring. The old Atlas assembly

plant, right past the southern Barrier. It's neutral ground. One hour. And you come alone. Understood?"

"Understood," Mark said. "I'll be alone."

The connection cut off, and he exhaled almost in relief. He'd gotten his chance — yet instead of freedom, it brought weight and fear.

"You're making a mistake," Mari remarked from her chair. She didn't lift her eyes from the book, but she'd heard every word.

"I don't have a choice," he said. "It's the only evidence."

"Proof?" She finally looked up at him, and her visor showed nothing but the reflection of the dim lamp. "Or bait? She's part of the same system that branded you a criminal. You think she'll come alone?"

Mari closed her book, sending up a faint cloud of dust.

"Stay here, Mark. You don't need to go anywhere. You're safe. I'll talk to Derek — his people won't go after you. We'll find another way."

Her words were rational, logical. And that was exactly why Mark couldn't accept them. He was tired of hiding — even if it had only been a day.

"Hiding is exactly what they want from me," he said. "To sit quietly while they rewrite the world however they please. Enough."

He walked to the coat rack and put on his old, worn jacket.

"I'm going."

Mari said nothing, running her hand thoughtfully over the book's cover. She seemed to be weighing the possibilities.

"Fine," she agreed at last. "It's your choice. But..."

She stepped to the window and looked out at the snowy alley.

"Tell the car to drop you at the old Hughes warehouse by the South Canal," she added without turning. "I'll meet you there."

"Why?"

"Because they'll be watching you."

Her words landed with the weight of an obvious fact — one he'd overlooked in his panic. She saw not only his next move, but the trap he was walking toward.

"Fine," he muttered.

The freezing winter air gave him a jolt of clarity. The despair receded; only a calm, vicious resolve remained. He got into the car.

"Atlas," he said.

The car glided forward without a sound, carrying him into the rising blizzard. The snow that drifted over the Old City like a light powder had turned here, in the open stretches of the industrial zone, into a real storm. Handfuls of dry ice grit hammered against the glass, and the defroster barely managed to melt them into a murky smear.

He headed south, toward the Barrier. The closer he came, the emptier the world outside became. The last grotesque residential blocks receded behind him, replaced by rusted skeletons of workshops. No one lived here. There was no point settling next to a wall the City could dismantle and shift at any moment, swallowing your home and your life.

The Barrier drew near — a solid black wall disappearing into the white haze on both sides. It was built from huge standard concrete slabs joined with steel clamps. Not an eternal monolith, but a temporary, mobile structure. A construction set that could be disassembled and rebuilt elsewhere, cutting off another slice of the Ring. Up above, in the snowstorm's whirl, dim searchlights glimmered, and the silhouettes of automated turrets emerged through the swirl.

Beside the Barrier, like a prehistoric beast crouched low to the ground, stood the old "Atlas" assembly plant. A gigantic, rusting shell of metal and concrete, its broken windows howling with the blizzard's wind. Once they assembled military vehicles here; now only rust and trash gathered.

The car stopped by the main entrance, its headlights carving the yawning mouth of the gates out of the storm. Mark stepped out, and the wind nearly knocked him over. He pulled his jacket tighter and hurried inside.

The vast assembly hall drowned in a frigid, hollow darkness. Snow drifting through the shattered windows swirled in ghostly glow breaking through the broken roof, forming ghostlike, dancing pillars in the gloom. It smelled of rusted metal and machine oil.

Diana waited for him in the center of the hall, beside the bare frame of an armored carrier. Alone. A plain tailored coat, hair neatly styled despite the storm outside. She didn't look like someone who was afraid or setting up an ambush. More like a detective at a meeting point.

"You came." Diana stepped toward him. "I thought you wouldn't dare."

Mark gave a short smile.

"I didn't have a choice, Diana. When your face is on every channel, the options get pretty limited."

Diana folded her arms across her chest.

"You always have a choice. You can surrender or disappear. But you chose to meet me. Why, Mark?"

He took a step forward. A heap of rust-eaten, frozen debris lay between them.

"I need your help. More precisely — your access," he said. "I want you to upload a file into the Center's database. As an official piece of evidence in the case of Officer Cross's murder."

For a moment, Diana froze — her face visibly paled in the half-dark of the hall.

"Are you out of your mind? You want me to plant evidence into the system from the primary suspect who's on the run? That's the end of my career."

He raised his wrist, and the cuff projected a trembling image into the dusty air.

"Watch."

The recording played back from his perspective. Diana silently watched the borg burst into the room. Watched him fire first, and Mark fire back.

"Self-defense," he said as the footage ended. "And what they show on the news — is a lie."

Diana remained silent for a long time, staring at the holo flickering in the air like a weightless piece of evidence. Snow swirled around her, drifting through the projection.

"But this is impossible," she said at last. "Two logs of the same event. One of them has to be fabricated."

"Which one, Diana?" Mark pressed. "The one you and the whole City saw? Or the one recorded by my old cuff, disconnected from the network? If you upload my file, they can't just wipe it — it becomes part of the official case. My status changes. I stop being a murderer and become a suspect."

Diana surely understood that his recording, unlike the official one, was intact — without a single splice. She looked him in the eyes.

"If this is real, they'll still hunt you down, Mark. And they'll shoot you during the arrest. The only way out is to surrender. That's your chance to stay alive. Surrender and hand over the footage yourself."

"Maybe," he said. "But I won't do that. I want them to know the truth. Upload the recording."

She gave him a long, heavy look. On one side of the scale lay her career; on the other — his life. And the scales trembled.

"Fine," she said at last. "I'll do it."

Mark felt the tension finally ease its chokehold on him. Hope. He had almost forgotten what that felt like. He brought his cuff to her hand, and the file — his one desperate piece of evidence — transferred over. The transfer completed.

"And now, Mark, you need to come with me," she said, her tone turning hard and official again.

He froze.

"What?"

"Surrender," she continued. "This recording is your only chance. If you surrender voluntarily, and I attach it to the case, it will secure your safety. There will be an internal investigation, the charges will be dropped."

The relief he'd just felt flipped into cold, white fury, burning every other emotion to ash. She wasn't helping him. She had taken the evidence and now intended to arrest him — by the book, by protocol. Not a friend, but a cog. A part of the system.

"No," he said sharply. "I'm not going anywhere with you. I know how this ends."

"You don't have a choice, Mark," her voice grew even colder. "I can't let you go."

Her palm transformed: with a soft click, a rifle barrel slid out from her wrist.

She was aiming at his chest. His former partner — now just another enemy.

The last thread connecting him to his past snapped. All the pain, resentment, and rage of this endless month converged into a single point. He was no longer a victim. No longer a supplicant.

A lunge to the side, behind the armored carrier's skeleton. A split second later, the air exploded with a dry, rapid crackle of gunfire. Bullets sent showers of sparks off the rusted metal where his head had been moments before. Diana was shooting to kill.

Without stopping, he burst from behind cover and sprinted toward the exit, toward the gaping, storm-filled maw of the gate. Torn apart by her betrayal and his own fury, the world around him shifted.

Everything slowed. The sound of gunfire thickened into dull, viscous thuds. The snowflakes swirling in the gateway froze in midair like billions of tiny, glittering points. Bullets leaving her barrel drifted forward not as flashes but as slow, red-hot wasps, lazily gliding through air as thick as syrup. He had no weapon — and even if he did, he wouldn't have fired back.

His body moved on its own. With impossible, inhuman grace and speed, he slipped between the bullets. He didn't dodge — he *shifted*, sliding through the gaps in their trajectories, and his body lost density, turning into a shimmering, translucent silhouette.

He burst out of the factory—and the world snapped back.

The sounds, the blizzard — all the brutal physics of reality crashed onto him, tearing him out of the trance. Stumbling, he made it to his car, yanked the door open, and collapsed into the seat. The engine came alive with a soft hum.

"Go!" he managed to shout.

Intermission 8. Diana

She really did want to help him. Not deceive, not lure — help. Yes, according to protocol, she was supposed to arrest or kill Mark Kane. But this was Mark... Not some faceless entry in a report, but her past.

In the Ring, he had always found time to explain how to file reports without mistakes. He helped her, supported her — while staying the same cynic who hated everyone around him. She loved him for that, and she left him for that. Everything had changed since, but the memories hadn't been erased.

She had believed she could find him a way out. If he surrendered voluntarily, it would be a mitigating factor.

"This isn't betrayal. This is better for him," she repeated to herself as she walked through the snow-filled plant. Her steps echoed through the empty corridors where rust coated the walls in a thick, crumbling layer. She activated the scanner on her cuff — trying to trace his signal, but the snowstorm's interference distorted everything. Mark was close — she felt it.

After their conversation, when her wrist unfolded and a barrel slid out from beneath her skin, she understood: the neural patch was thinking and deciding for her now. A vibration tore through her bones. A thought flashed in her head: this is a malfunction.

It felt like watching herself from the outside. The barrel spat fire. Everything around her lost sharpness, turning into a blurred backdrop. Mark turned, his face pale in the glow of the lamp. She wanted to scream: *"Stop, this isn't me!"* — but she couldn't even open her mouth. Her body remained frozen.

No. I don't want this.

But the shots rang out. The roar echoed across the factory, bullets striking the wall behind him. Sparks from rusted metal, fragments of concrete raining down.

She remembered their old argument — how he'd told her that patches change people. She'd laughed then, but now she knew she'd been wrong. Everything had started to fall apart from that moment onward.

Never, not once in all her years of service, would she have missed at this distance. Less than ten meters, visibility decent despite the snow.

A miss.

Good. I didn't want to hit him anyway.

But the surrounding space trembled in the frozen haze. Every movement Mark made looked unreal — too blurred, too fluid. He slipped around the corner without looking back. The world distorted around him, redirecting the bullets.

Her hand — an alien tool — moved on its own, the patch issuing commands she couldn't hear but felt as pressure in her temples.

When Mark burst through the gates and got into the car, her other hand rose by itself. A dry click — the panel opened. A compact one-shot grenade launcher slid out from beneath her skin, meant for emergencies. She tried to jerk, to throw off the aim.

"No!" she screamed. "Don't!"

Her desperate cry echoed through the empty hall. Her body didn't respond. She couldn't change anything.

The grenade left the launcher and shot forward with perfect, machine-like precision, cutting through the blizzard and curving toward his car. It detonated right above the windshield in a garish orange flare. The snow swallowed the shrapnel. The car jolted, but the engine roared, tires screeching across the ice. Wreathed in flame, it tore away.

A trail of fire stretched along the snowy road, and the blast's echo still rolled through the empty factory blocks. But the car held its line, following its assigned route. Diana stood at the gate, snow falling onto her coat, melting from her body heat. The headlights receded, weaving between the debris.

Mark had always acted on impulse, on instinct, on reckless momentum. And suddenly, he'd shown such foresight.

But that didn't change the fact: she had killed him.

The headlights flickered one last time before disappearing around the bend. The blizzard remained with her — and the scorched void inside.

The weight of a foreign will slowly drained away, leaving a headache behind. The grenade launcher slid back under her skin with a soft hiss, as if nothing had happened. Her fingers obeyed again, her knees trembled; she leaned against the wall, and the plaster crumbled in a suffocating cloud. Her breath burst out in white plumes into the frozen air.

She inhaled and exhaled — again and again. A vacuum in her chest. A sticky heaviness in her mind, as if someone had run her thoughts through a filter and handed them back.

I fired. I launched the grenade. But it wasn't me.

She repeated it to herself, trying to grasp it. Soldiers justify it by saying, "My hands moved on their own." Psychiatrists call it dissociation. But this had actually happened. Her body had lived its own life while she remained a spectator. This wasn't a hallucination — the metal under her skin was still warming her hands.

"Who?" she breathed. But there was no answer. Only the wind, hissing and throwing fistfuls of snow.

Protocol and law. Empty words, behind which someone pulled the strings of her nerves. Her life — service record, promotions, her dream of the Center — who had been steering it all this time? The system? An algorithm? The thing that had forced her to shoot at Mark despite her own *no*? She remembered installing the neural patch: a quick procedure in a pristine, gleaming clinic, with promises of full control and safety. Lies.

Who was looking now at the burning trail of the car — Diana Wells, detective? Or that foreign, invisible force that had killed Mark?

She stood for a minute, staring into the darkness. She needed to report, but no words came. Instead, she turned and headed back into the hall, her legs heavy. Snow crunched under her boots.

Above the factory, faintly, a few drones whispered past. But she no longer saw them.

Intermission 9. Mark

The explosion. The impact.

He felt it—like a giant hammer had crushed the car and slammed him into the seat. The cabin erupted in fire. Not even fire—just pure, unbearable heat radiating from everywhere at once.

He screamed when the first droplets of molten windshield struck his face. Molten glass burned his eyes out instantly and bit into his skin. His scream died in his lungs as liquefied glass filled his mouth.

The pain was everywhere. Scalding, viscous liquid—the melted dashboard, the dissolving seat lining—clung to his clothes, to his skin, and the heat ate down to the bone. The cabin was engulfed; the air itself turned to fire, incinerating his lungs with every ragged breath.

With a hiss, the automatic fire-suppression system kicked in, coating the walls of the cabin—and Mark—with thick white foam.

A detached thought flickered through his burning mind: "It'll only prolong the agony."

The car—his loyal, soulless partner—was trying its best, flooding the cabin with extinguishing foam, but it no longer mattered.

The world collapsed into blinding, white pain that seized him in monstrous, pulsing waves. His clothes burned, his flesh liquefied. A living piece of meat roasting in a metal box.

The car moved on its own, obedient to its emergency routine, but for Mark there was no street, no City. There was only the fire under his skin, and the pain that had become his universe. Time dissolved into an endless, torturous second.

Then the car stopped, the engine fell silent.

All he wanted was to tumble out of the blazing hell into the snow. To cool whatever was left of him. To let the white, clean cold swallow his tor-

ment. That thought—just that one thought of saving cold—kept him conscious.

His fingers—chunks of charred, useless flesh—managed to hook onto something, press a handle.

The door opened, and he spilled out into a soft, deep drift, letting out one last moan of agony as the snow touched what was left of his scorched skin.

Then consciousness shut off like a blown fuse.

Chapter 27. You Are Dead

The first thing that returned was the smell.

Not the stench of burning plastic and smoke, but a calm, warm scent — a mixture of dried herbs, old books, and something else, elusive and sweet as pollen. Mari's scent.

Consciousness latched onto it, dragging itself out of the darkness. Every breath stripped away the memory of his own burning flesh.

He waited for the pain — for the monstrous, pulsing waves that had swallowed him whole — to come back. But they didn't. His body felt light, almost weightless. No fire, no melted glass embedded in his face. Nothing.

The pain was gone. In this new, painless darkness, he savored its absence. He didn't want to open his eyes or move. He lay in a warm, herb-scented void and felt peace, and didn't want it to end.

Then he heard quiet, almost soundless footsteps approaching. Someone sat beside him.

A touch — cool, damp, and soft — brushed against his forehead. Gentle, steady hands wiped away imaginary ash and nonexistent blood. The movements were slow and tender.

He felt moisture. The sensation burst in his mind like a flare of pure, nearly painful relief. He could feel touch; he could distinguish cool from warm, damp from dry.

Which meant his nerve endings had not died. His skin was still his; his body hadn't been replaced with biosilicon. He was still human.

Only that thought gave him enough strength to open his eyes.

Reality wavered, losing focus and edges. A ceiling lost in shadows, walls lined with books. Mari sat beside him, watching him. Her visor glimmered softly in the half-light, casting delicate shifting reflections on her face. She waited for him to wake.

"What... happened to me?" Mark rasped.

His throat was dry; his tongue barely moved, like a foreign, disobedient piece of flesh.

"You're all right," she said. "You're safe."

Safe — a strange, forgotten word. The last thing he remembered was agony. Fire devouring flesh. Molten glass burning into his face.

"The car..." he whispered. "The fire... I... I was dying."

"But you're here," Mari said just as calmly. "I found you in that alley where the car stopped and dragged you inside."

He tried to sit up — and only then realized his body was tightly bandaged. Chest, shoulders, neck. Even part of his face was wrapped in cloth. The bandages were moist, soaked with that same herbal, calming scent. His mind refused to reconcile the two facts: his memory of agony and the complete absence of pain now.

"This is all..." he looked at her. "You did this? You healed me? And how did you even drag me here?"

"Too many questions." Mari gave him a sad smile.

She stayed silent for a moment, then set aside the cup of water and the sponge.

"I couldn't heal you the way they heal people in the City, Mark," she said quietly. "I don't have their technologies or their medication. So... the news isn't good."

Mark didn't understand what she meant.

"To be honest," she continued uncertainly, "I'm afraid to even tell you... I don't know what exactly detonated in your car. Maybe one of the Agency's latest military prototypes, or some thermobaric munition with nano-capsules. But there was something inside it that... triggered mutations. Your body is changing. It's better if you see it yourself."

Without waiting for his answer, she began removing the bandages carefully, layer by layer.

She started with his head.

Mark squeezed his eyes shut, expecting to find a charred, torn mask in place of a face, like in that nightmare inside the car. But when she finished, the sensation was unmistakable — the face was intact, only somehow *wrong*. The skin felt tight and unnaturally hard, like the surface of an insect.

"You can look, Mark," Mari finally said.

In the small polished steel mirror she held, the reflection was not Mark.

The skin had become a glossy black shell, like obsidian or chitin. It covered everything from his temples to his neck. His nose and mouth were still there, but distorted — as if someone had redrawn them. Strange, unnatural, like illustrations from Mari's ancient books.

Instead of eyes — two smooth, utterly empty hollows. No sclera, no pupils — two shards of pure darkness. On his forehead, the skin had swollen and fissured: dark growths pushed through the fissures, like the beginnings of horns.

She removed the bandages from his arms. His fingers had lengthened, the skin had turned black; the nails had hardened and sharpened, becoming short, twisted claws.

Mari looked at him, but through the visor it was impossible to tell whether it was sympathy or curiosity.

"I think it's spreading farther," she said, pointing at his arm. The black, glossy skin had claimed his forearms up to the elbows. "I'm sorry, Mark, but there's nothing I can do. I tried to slow it down."

He touched his new hands — strong, alien. Muscles shifted beneath the black skin, denser and more powerful than before.

Deep inside, a cold fire of rage ignited. Not rage at Diana — but at those who had done this to him. At those who moved him across their board, who burned him, erased his reality, and turned him into a monster.

"All right," he exhaled. His voice sounded lower and hollow now, with a rumbling, metallic undertone. "I guess I'll have to wear a hood."

Strangely, his comm had survived. The casing was charred, the edges partially melted, the screen covered in a web of cracks — but it still functioned. Mark rolled it in his hand.

"Good thing you listened to me," Mari said without a trace of reproach. Just stating a fact — as always. "Came back like I told you — to the warehouse."

Mark looked at her questioningly.

"After you left the factory, they hit it," she continued. "Agency combat drones. Burned everything to the ground. They weren't searching for anyone — they obliterated the entire building. Then they destroyed your car

and the warehouse. The news reported the deaths of Detective Diana Wells and former officer Mark Kane. Case closed."

In her visor, his new monstrous face was reflected back at him.

"You're dead, Mark."

He should have felt relief — the simple joy of surviving. But instead he thought of Diana.

The horror and confusion on her face when she fired. Her own body acting against her will. She had become the same kind of instrument he had been — a subverted machine with the simulation of choice.

And for some reason, looking at his new black, clawed fingers, he felt sorry for her.

Hating her would have been easier. Blaming her for betrayal would have been human. But he felt only a muted, quiet pity. Why — he didn't know. Perhaps because part of him, the part that had been Mark Kane, had burned in that car, and what now sat on Mari's couch was seeing the world with different, inhuman eyes.

The man who'd hidden behind a badge and a uniform was dead. What remained was a shadow. His answer to their game.

By evening, the Ring froze once more, sealed shut by white silence.

Mark climbed onto the roof of Mari's house. He sat on the snow-covered parapet, and his black eyes, indifferent to night and wind, looked out over the Ring.

Below him sprawled chaos locked beneath dead ice. A few window lights, dim streetlamps, ashen smoke rising from chimneys — people burning coal and wood. On the horizon shimmered the murky halo of the City. A distant, indifferent light, alien to everything happening below.

He thought about Diana. A marionette just like him. Her strings made of protocols and faith in the system, his — made of rage.

But he still couldn't admit to himself that his pain was not only because of her or the Agency. Not because of the life from which he had been yanked like a rusted nail and thrown into the dirt of the Ring.

Eliza. Her image clung to his mind like an open wound. On that rooftop in the rain, when she first turned toward him — hair plastered to her temples, eyes looking at him as if they had known each other their whole lives. That image lived deep, where neither protocols nor words

could reach. Eliza on the parapet, turning back to him, saying: *"There you are, Mark."* She couldn't have lied then, and he had always known it.

Her words had struck him like a revelation, stripping bare his own hatred, his darkness. She saw him as he feared to be seen — and stayed. On that rooftop, in that room soaked with the smell of damp and rot, she was real.

He tried to recall her empty, blood-soaked sockets, to imagine where Eliza might be now. The shadow of memory slipped away, melting like a snowflake on a burning hand. Even Mari, with all her connections in the Ring, had found nothing. The Agency had swallowed her whole.

He imagined how she would look at him now. One eye azure, flickering like the City's neon, the other dark and bottomless as the Ring's abyss — resting on him. And what would she see? Not the Mark who sat with her on that rooftop, watching the City glow. He was the antithesis of a man, a monster belonging neither to the Ring nor the City nor himself.

Claws, sharp as obsidian blades, digging into his palms. There was no pain — his new skin was deaf to it. He missed his own body, the simple ache that reminded him who he had been.

Eliza hadn't wanted a monster. She had wanted his fury, his rebellion, his desire to tear apart what shackled them both — but not this deformed, inhuman shell. He remembered her touch, the rhythm of her breathing blending with the rain, and the mark on her hand glinting in the dark. Back then he thought it was the beginning of something greater. Now he understood: she hadn't been calling him to follow — she had pushed him toward the edge of the abyss, where he became something else.

She was chaos gathering storms, just as she'd said, but in that chaos he had felt alive. More alive than in the sterile corridors of the City or the filthy streets of the Ring. She had become his mirror, a reflection of what he had hidden even from himself. And now, when he had become that reflection, he didn't know whether she would accept him as he was.

Or reject him — the way he would have rejected himself, if he could still see with his old eyes.

Like Diana, he was nothing more than a piece on a chessboard. A pawn with no grasp of the rules or the players. Could a pawn ever become a queen? Was that her design all along?

He rose from the parapet's edge, snow sliding off his shoulders. The Ring lived its own life — wild, filthy, human. On the horizon, the City glowed with a light he no longer claimed. If Eliza had been the one gathering storms, then perhaps he would become the one to bring the tempest. Not for her, not for the Ring — but for himself, for what he had become and what he still might become.

Soft footsteps behind him pulled him out of his trance. He didn't turn — he knew her rhythm, the faint crunch of snow under her boots. Mari stopped beside him, her breath drifted into the falling snow like pale smoke. She said nothing, but Mark felt her presence — somewhere deep in the place where a sliver of his old self still smoldered.

"You're here," she whispered, and there was no pity, no fear in her voice. She saw him — not a monster, not a shadow, but Mark, still clinging to the last remnants of the man he once was.

She stepped closer and wrapped her arms around him. Her arms slipped over his shoulders, and he froze inside his hardening shell, a stranger to touch. But her warmth seeped through that dead armor — like a thin current, a breath of life he hadn't expected. Not everything was lost yet.

"I know you're thinking of her," she murmured. Her voice felt distant, speaking from somewhere deep and unseen. "You think you're lost. But you're here. With me."

She pulled him closer, her lips brushing his — careful, like placing a seal. A kiss — warm, alive. Even through the visor, he felt the heat of her mouth. Her skin beneath his fingers was soft, fragile, and he feared tearing it.

"Come," she said, tugging him gently as she stepped back. Her fingers closed around his wrist, the pressure becoming an anchor that tied him to something living.

They descended from the roof. Snow quickly erased their footsteps, but the Ring held its breath, watching them. Mari's apartment met them with darkness and the dull gleam of a snow-blinded window. The light from her visor slid across the walls, turning the shadows into shifting patterns that seemed almost alive.

She led him toward the center of the room, where the shadows thickened, wrapping them in a dense fabric of darkness. Her movements were slow, deliberate, each gesture carrying a meaning neither of them could put into words. Her fingers traced along his hardened skin — not touching a barrier, but the surface that concealed a silent secret. His claws, sharp and alien, brushed her carefully, barely grazing, as if he feared leaving a mark. Their breaths merged into a single rhythm, drowning out the murmuring Ring and the City's glow beyond the window.

Her fingers found him, slid over the places where the black skin gave way to living flesh, and every touch was an acknowledgment— not of what he had become, but of who he still was. He answered her in the same rhythm, and their closeness meant more than the joining of bodies. They performed a ritual where his darkness and her light searched for balance. Shadows trembled on the walls, mirroring their rhythm. and the scent of herbs thickened, filling the air with an ancient, living force.

When it was over, they lay in the dark, her head resting on his chest. Her visor glowed faintly, casting trembling flickers onto the ceiling, and her breathing was the only sound in the room besides the whisper of snow outside. Mark watched her, feeling her warmth keeping him from falling into the void. He did not know where Eliza was, nor what he would become tomorrow. But in this moment, with Mari beside him, he was more than a shadow, and less than a monster.

"Mark," she whispered. "Next time I ask, you'll take me with you."

It wasn't a request. It was a command — and he agreed.

On the shelf, among books with darkened spines, lay her dagger. Its blade was crusted with dried blood.

Intermission 10. Lily

At the top of the BioTech Tower, silence reigned. Not peace, but the tension of a spring wound to breaking.

Lily stood by the panoramic window, looking at the City but not seeing it. Her porcelain face was twisted by an emotion no one had seen on her face in many years — anger.

She turned sharply, crossed the room toward the table carved from a single slab of white onyx, grabbed the ritual dagger lying upon it, and drove it into the surface with inhuman force. The onyx cracked, and the table split apart with a sharp, resounding snap.

Amy, standing by the door, didn't even flinch. She stepped closer.

"Our plan with the Agency is still on track," she said softly, soothingly. "Michael got what he wanted. They're no longer a threat, and soon—"

"But this isn't about the Agency, Amy!" Lily hissed, struggling to keep her voice level, its sound scraping like metal on stone. She stared at the split table, at the dagger trembling in the fracture. "How—why—did she dare interfere with my design? How could a creature like that ruin everything?! Last night... you felt it too, didn't you?"

She tore the dagger from the fissure and hurled it at the wall with violent force.

"Yes," Amy answered after a brief pause. "Everyone felt it."

"A century and a half. A century and a half of preparation! I found him, guided him, built the perfect trap, the perfect lure! Everything we worked toward, everything we sought — all of it undone!"

Amy lowered her gaze; her voice was gentle but firm:

"Everything *you* sought, Lily, was to bring Him back."

Lily's rage dimmed for a heartbeat, replaced by something older, endless — pain.

"Yes," she whispered, and her whisper was more terrifying than any scream. "That is all I ever sought."

Deep inside, she knew the truth: power had become a burden. She was tired of eternal dominion, of a game where every move was only the consequence of former triumphs. The struggle with the Agency had never been about power — it had been her last justification, her last hope that something existed beyond it.

"And what now?" Lily smoothed back her hair, her fingers trembling with the fury she still fought to contain. "Even if our plan with the Agency succeeds, what then? Our main advantage... is gone. He is in the hands of that... that nothing."

Amy carefully retrieved the dagger from the floor and set it back on the table, covering the crack as if placing a dressing over a wound.

"Look at it from another angle," she said. "You assume Mark is a victim — that he's weaker, that she's controlling him."

Lily shot her a razor-sharp glance — she understood at once where Amy was going.

"What if he hasn't crossed over to her side?" Amy continued calmly. "What if *she* has joined him?"

Cold, sobering clarity returned to Lily.

"If it's the other way around," Amy finished, "then we don't just gain an advantage. We gain everything."

Amy stepped to the window and stood beside her, looking out at the glowing City.

"Go to the river, Lily," Amy suggested. "Maybe He knows."

The reply did not come immediately.

"Even before this, it was difficult, Amy — unbearably so.," Lily said bitterly. She'd calmed down by then. "Now it grows harder with every passing day."

She paused, weighing the risks.

"No. I won't go. It could make things worse." At last, she concluded, "But we need to know what's happening in the Ring. I can't go there — the Agency is monitoring me. So it will have to be you. Find out what he knows now... and what he has become."

Lily's gaze sank into the lights of the City. Amy was right. Despair was an emotion for humans, and Lily hadn't been human for a long time.

"Yes," she said. Her voice had become emotionless again, cold as a machine. "You're right. We need to assess the asset."

Chapter 28. God Bless

The morning was gray and cold, like someone had thrown a wet rag over the sky and left the dying sun to suffocate underneath. Broadway's asphalt gleamed with last night's rain, slick with rainbow oil stains, the gutters swallowing dirty water mixed with cigarette butts and shredded newspapers shouting about market crashes.

He walked slowly. His legs carried him of their own accord, each step prewritten in someone else's algorithm. The bag dragged at his shoulder, the strap biting into his skin, and he thought about how predictable this feeling was — pain, weight, repeat. The air was a mix of gasoline fumes, burnt grease from the hot dog carts, and the city's faint, rotten breath. A breath that was also part of the script. Somewhere nearby, a manhole cover clanged, a jet of steam shot upward, hung in the air, then settled on coats and jackets as a sticky, wet film.

Everything felt like a scene out of a cheap action movie.

He'd stopped watching films. Not all at once. At first, they just bored him. He'd sit in a theater, chewing popcorn, already knowing what would happen ten minutes in advance. The hero loses everything. Then finds strength. And in the end he wins. If not him — then the people he fights for. Like the girl by the hot dog cart, with a backpack covered in peace-sign pins, believing in the idea of 'good.'

Then he tried books — classics, pulp, anything. The stories changed, but the skeleton stayed the same. The fall — like the homeless man with the cardboard sign saying 'God Bless,' another built-in function of the scenery right under a Coca-Cola billboard — always the same. The journey. The return. Victory or sacrifice. The thousand-faced hero — the same doll in different clothes. Any emotion, any twist — you could spot the template a mile off, as if everything had been copied from one script.

The oily rainbow puddles looked like magazine covers: bright, shimmering — hiding the same thing every time.

Culture wasn't a mirror of the world, or the voice of humanity, or exploration, or progress. It was a machine stamping out story tropes, wrappers for code. Instruction manuals on how to live right, how to suffer right, how to die right. Living right meant buying a house on a mortgage and having kids. Suffering right meant doing it on a beach, staring at the sunset.

Dying right meant dying with honor, for your country, guts spilled out on the ground. All according to script — the city, his steps, and the bag with an AR-15, converted to full-auto and wrapped in an oil-soaked rag.

Sometimes he'd shut a book halfway down the page — just to break the program. He didn't want to obey the rule everyone pretends isn't a rule at all: finish the chapter. Place a bookmark. Go to bed. Repeat.

Even the classics betrayed the same template. He read Dostoevsky and found himself thinking not about Raskolnikov, but about the role assigned to him: how long he was supposed to suffer, how long the misery had to stretch before Sonya appeared — mercy incarnate.

Everything came down to roles. Everything was prewritten.

The weight of the bag on his shoulder, the smell of gasoline, the steam rising from a manhole — all part of the code, scripted for a scene where he wasn't a hero but a simulation of one.

And that was the real horror. If art was repetition, if imagination was a loop, then what was left? He watched the people passing by, their predictable movements, faces like frames from any movie, and felt: the rifle in his bag was the only thing that didn't lie. Metal didn't pretend to be a story and didn't promise meaning. It just existed. Soon he would enter the subway, descend the piss-slick stairs, and step into a car.

A street vendor strained his throat yelling, "Pretzels! Two for a dollar!" His voice drowned in the morning New York cacophony: the drone of engines, taxi horns stuck in gridlock, the far-off wail of sirens echoing off skyscrapers. The scrape of a soda cart's metal wheels added rhythm — sharp, insistent, like a ticking clock.

The alarm rings. He wakes up, eats, goes to work, lunch, back home, TV, dinner, sleep.

Day after day — the same loop, like a toy train on rails. The track always closed. He walked, the bag tugging at his shoulder, watching the vendor push the cart forward — another piece of the same cycle.

Rivers of people streamed along the sidewalks. Office clerks in wrinkled suits clutching the fresh Wall Street Journal, headlines screaming about the Asian financial crisis and market losses. Students with backpacks covered in pins — Save the Planet, Fight the Power — wove through the flow. All of them parts of the same eternal circle: study to get a job, then work to feed the ones whining in the booster seat of the car.

Couriers on rollerblades, cigarettes clenched between their teeth, squeezed through the crowd, breathing smoke into the air. It hung there like the city's own sweat — hot dogs, cigarettes, everything keeping the same tired loop running.

In the corner, beside a boarded-up storefront, a homeless man sat wrapped in a filthy red blanket. Pigeons scrambled under his feet, fighting over a crust of bread, and one with a shattered wing wandered behind them, hopeless and slow.

Once he caught himself, realizing he was living like a mechanism. Like the pigeon clawing at the crust. Like the homeless man in the red blanket. Like the clerk with the newspaper, handing over a dollar for a pretzel to quiet his hunger for a little while. People called that life, but he knew better: it was just a program. Live — work — consume — reproduce — die.

People loved to say you had to create something new, leave a mark, bring beauty, make a discovery, contribute something. But it was the same pattern, just a different mask. The dopamine hit in Einstein's brain was no different from the cup of Death Wish the homeless man bought under the subway stairs. Books? A new set of rules, a new template for the same recycled feelings. Inventions? Nuclear bombs and new methods to watch, control, and squeeze a human being inside his cage. Progress was nothing but fuel for the loop.

A mother pulled her child by the hand—the kid whining for candy, his voice drowning under the drone of engines. In that whining he heard the beginning of the cycle, and in the mother—its exhausted continuation. In twenty years they would trade places. And no one ever asked why. Every-

thing was "for the children." Children are the flowers of life, they liked to say. Then they sent them to Vietnam.

Reproduction lost meaning if the ending was always the same—decay. Food lost its meaning if hunger returned tomorrow. Everything humans did was just extending the loop. Like the pigeon with the broken wing reaching for a crust it would never touch.

As a kid, he was told: "Study so you can get a job." Later: "Work so you can live well." Later still: "Take a vacation—you've earned it." The goals changed, but the step stayed the same. Everything ran on inertia; take it away and movement stops.

A student walked past with a backpack where a little pin read: Believe. For everyone else, it was a sign of hope. For him—it was code: she would reproduce, her child would whine, the loop would spin on.

Everyone chased pleasure — it didn't matter how they got it. Some shot up heroin by the 125th Street exit, others drank wine against an ocean sunset. Some paid for a prostitute, others to the sound of the wedding march. "Normal people" called it life — house, kids, vacations, hobbies. But it was the same chemistry: a small dose to drown the void. Someone did good deeds for gratitude or a ticket to heaven. Saints tortured their flesh, slept on stones, stayed silent for years. But what changed? What difference did it make *how* you triggered the chemical dump in the brain — a drug, a kind act, or whipping yourself bloody? Different levers on the same machine.

Artists, scientists, poets bragged about seeking truth or beauty. But their discoveries and books were just new packaging for the same pill: another way to shove endorphins into the brain, a narcotic for consciousness.

Believers did the same thing, just in a more elaborate form. They agreed to wait for their dose as a delayed reward. Their heaven was an eternal syringe. An endless supply of pleasure they didn't have to buy by the subway stairs. They believed in an infinite orgasm stretched over eternity and called it salvation. They thought they were above everyone else, but in truth they were the greediest of all. They didn't want pleasure here and now — they wanted absolute bliss forever.

They were all the same, and the thought made him nauseous. He didn't feel like a person but like a function. Like a stomach with one job — digest. Like a clerk with one job — swallow the news of a crisis. Like a cog that had

to keep spinning, even when no one knew why. Like the pigeon with the broken wing hauling itself across the asphalt.

He stopped at the entrance to the 42nd Street subway. Neon glowed overhead — TKTS in bright red letters calling people to shows where the heroes loved with loud speeches and suffered on schedule, from seven to ten. Coca-Cola in white and silver lights, their reflections shivering in puddles with the promise of happiness you could buy for a dollar. Everything around whispered: "Drink this, watch that, feel this way."

Movies, ads, or the roar of the crowd — all of it was a prescription. Not discovery or exploration, but instructions on how to live. Beside him, the green currency-exchange board blinked numbers: another line of code dictating what should matter — money, status, success. The crowd flowed down the stairs into the subway depths like water running into a storm drain.

The steps were slick, coated in layers of gum, cigarette butts, and grime. They smelled of piss, rusty metal, and old rags. Water trickled down in thin streams, dirty slush squelching underfoot. Someone slipped, grabbed the railing, and snapped, "Watch where you're going, asshole!" He kept walking, and each step echoed in his skull like a beat: work, suffer, reproduce, die. Repeat.

Movies taught people how to love—beautifully, with confessions in the rain, like on that "Titanic" poster on the wall. Faded, with Leo and Kate promising tragedy and catharsis. Novels taught how to suffer—slowly, but with an ending where everything makes sense. Ads dictated what to call beautiful: smoke in your lungs, winning the lottery, the perfect body. Even the torn Gateway 2000 poster with a cow scribbled over in black marker was part of the code: buy a computer, work faster. Layered on top of it all, Zephyr and Crash tags in black and red—signatures of those trying to scream—but their scream had been turned into instructions: paint by template, rebel by example.

People crowded around the turnstiles: a guy in an oversized jacket glancing at a girl in tight jeans digging for her token—one-fifty, a worn little disk of metal like a promise of love, the kind that's supposed to change everything. He watched them and thought: not people—functions. The guy—desire. The girl—searching. Another one, in a torn hoodie, jamming

a match into the turnstile—a system glitch, but still by the system's own rules. The old woman with the grocery bag blocking the way—consumption. The teenager in the Yankees cap fidgeting behind her—loyalty: cheer for the team, suffer, repeat.

Culture didn't reflect reality and didn't grant freedom: it was firmware, a narrow hallway with no exit, where every step—from the gum stuck to the stairs to the token in someone's hand, from the graffiti shrieks to the neon signs—was prewritten. Even the stray conversations drifting out of the crowd—"Buy a new phone, it'll be easier," "Don't stress, it'll work out"—sounded like commands: consume, obey, accept. Culture didn't just create reality; it devoured it in return, like an ouroboros.

He slid the token into the turnstile slot. A click—like the bolt of the rifle inside his bag. Everything around him was code keeping people on their rails. Newspapers explained what to consider important: elections, stocks, crises. Magazines reminded you what to feel: get a job, fall in love, don't lose your mind.

He walked toward the platform, and every step, every smell — piss, rust — confirmed it: culture wasn't reflection, it was command. And in this corridor there was no exit except the one he carried in his bag.

The platform hummed, a low vibration of voices bouncing off the concrete walls where cracks spread like veins toward the ceiling. The smell of the tracks—metallic, sharp—mixed with sweat, garbage stench from the corners, and something acrid and chemical. In the corners—cigarette butts, Snickers wrappers, crushed Marlboro packs, puddles of urine—another line of instruction drilled in since childhood: dirt = bad, cleanliness = good.

The rails trembled from the approaching train, the vibration pulsing through the soles of his shoes. Somewhere water dripped from the ceiling into a bucket left by maintenance workers—drip-drip, a rhythm like a ticking clock, like the school axiom: one plus one = two.

Everyone waited. A woman dragged a child by the hand. He clung to her coat but still whined, "Mom, I wanna go home!" She hissed, "Be patient, almost there." That was the entire cycle. Tired = bad, home = good, mother = salvation. Firmware, deeper than culture or morality.

You could throw away movies and ads, but what do you do with what they call truth? "Thing." "Good." "One plus one." That was what they taught a newborn, hammered into him in school, repeated in books, the basis of the world's logic. But even some French guy wrote that logic wasn't a law, but a habit a child develops while stacking blocks. And what if I don't want your logic to work? What if the law you call natural is just a forced frame, like this water dripping into a bucket because drop = water, bucket = collect water? There could be another logic—chaos, puddle, decay. There could. Nothing is true, everything is permitted.

A man in a suit buried his face in a newspaper with the headline *"Asian Crisis Threatens Wall Street"*—bold letters screaming about the Thai baht collapsing, the South Korean won cut in half, Indonesia sinking into recession—thirteen percent of GDP gone, speculators ripping the skin off Asia and leaving bare bones of debt—but even here truth was just firmware: crisis = threat, Wall Street = center, save the system because order = safety, chaos = doom, and the man frowned, flipping pages, not realizing the headline was a label programming his mind to nod: *"Yes, this is bad, let's fix it, let's make it right."*

A teenager in headphones bobbed his head to unheard Nirvana, his fingers drumming on his thigh: rhythm = pleasure, wired into the script. Even sensations were hard-coded: pain = bad, joy = good—an axiom drilled in since childhood. Who decided that? Why can't someone want pain, or prefer chaos to order? Punks with multicolored mohawks—green, pink, glued hair and hairspray—laughed and slammed their chains against the railing. Mohawk, chain on metal—but gravity still pulls down and trains still run on schedule.

No one looked each other in the eye—everyone was busy with their own role: the woman with the child checking her wallet, the man in the suit neatly folding his newspaper, the punks elbowing each other. When a child is shown an object and told "chair"—that's firmware; when adults chant "this is right"—that's algorithm. The world itself doesn't name things and doesn't know "good" or "evil." There is only the primal chaos hidden beneath the shell of definitions.

The train burst out of the tunnel with a deafening roar, its headlights slicing into his eyes—he squinted—wind throwing up dust and torn news-

paper scraps. The crowd swayed, squeezed tight near the edge. The woman pulled the child closer, the punks yelled something obscene, but everyone moved along the rails of their logic: station = stop, flashing headlights = step back, wind = hold tight. Metal screeched, sparks spat from under the wheels. The cold metal in his bag was the only thing that didn't obey the axioms. And when the route number blinked in front of him, memory aligned: *"My word is six and fifty."* He was here to divide, not multiply.

The Pact survives only because people blindly accept the axioms shoved down their throats. But what if you don't? What if you say "no" even to something tiny, refuse to treat as truth what everyone else calls truth? A child learns to add not because the world works that way, but because his brain eventually grows into that pattern. "One plus one = two" isn't a law of nature — it's a developmental stage. But what if you stop there, refuse to "grow up" in their sense? Right at that edge, where the simplest rules collapse — one plus one isn't two, pain = orgasm, chaos = home — that's where real freedom begins. But the price of that freedom is the void, ruleless, numberless, without categories. Only the unthinkable remains — the unknowable thing the Pact hides.

There's no other way out.

The doors hissed open, letting the crowd spill in.

He squeezed in last — between two big guys in leather jackets, arguing about basketball. "Jordan tore them apart again last night, carried the whole damn team through the playoffs." One had a Duane Reade bag with a beer can glinting inside; the other waved his hands, spraying spit on everyone nearby. The doors closed and smacked someone's backpack — thump, fabric crumpled.

The car was old, paint peeling, rust bleeding through the blue layer. "Fuck NYPD" scratched into the wall with something sharp — a nail or a key, the letters jagged. Metal grab bars stained with gum, fingerprints; seats burned through by cigarettes, yellow plastic turned almost black with age.

Inside, it was hot. The air clung to skin like a wet film. The smells fused into a choking cocktail: body sweat, cheap cologne with that disinfectant bite, spilled coffee, the wet dog smell of old coats. Overhead, the metal tang of overheated lights pressed down, blinking, illuminating faces in stuttering flashes.

None of it was random. It was a system. Layer after layer: morality, culture, numbers, categories. Together they formed the Pact. Sweat and rot became a formula: discomfort everyone tolerates because the Pact whispers — "endure, this is normal, you'll get off soon." Even "Fuck NYPD" was rebellion inside the frame: cops = bad, arrest = lesson.

The Pact isn't a contract — it's the firmware of reality. It holds everything in place: from simple words — train car = transport — to the death of a loved one, where grief = flowers and speeches. It whispers: candy for a child = good, spilled coffee = bad, Jordan in midair = beautiful, peeling paint = ugly, one plus one = two, and you will not change it. Even the crisis in Asia was explained by formula: baht + speculators = threat, therefore save the system, restore order.

The big guy with the Duane Reade bag popped open the beer — *pssh-hht*, foam running down over his fingers. Freedom, but within bounds: drink, relax, don't break the door. The Pact makes the world understandable, bearable. Without it, only the void remains — air without a smell, lamps flickering without rhythm, bodies brushing for no reason. And that void would turn you inside out.

People call that freedom. But in the Pact, freedom is the freedom of a man on death row. You can rebel: skip work, cheat on your wife, jam a match in a turnstile. Even kill — with a knife or a bullet. The system is built for those failures: cops arrest, court sentences, therapy reabsorbs you into the herd. A person thinks he's free, but it's freedom from the window to the bars. Yell, argue about the game, wave your arms, then sit down, hold your bag, endure the heat.

The train jerked, lights flickered, shadows danced across the windows. He unzipped the bag wider, fingers resting on the oily cloth. The Pact tightened around him and whispered: "Don't do it, it's evil, one plus one = prison." But real freedom isn't in a crack — it's in a rupture: to do to the Pact what it does to you. And the weight of the bag pulled at his shoulder with that truth heavy in his hands.

Chapter 29. Be Confident, Be Yourself

A skinny girl with light-brown hair, a white coat, and dark sunglasses was flipping through the March issue of *Seventeen*. The spread showed prom night: shimmering dresses, smiling boys in tuxedos. *"Be confident, be yourself, choose the best night of your life."* She mouthed the words like she was memorizing a spell.

He watched her and thought she was installing an upgrade. The magazine taught her to love herself — slim, glowing, next to a boy in a bow tie. Not with chaos. Not with rupture. Her code would update, so the cycle wouldn't glitch.

He was interested in the glitch. When a person refuses and breaks the norms — that's when something alive appears. Not a cycle, not an instruction, but a spark you can't predict or hold. In those cracks he saw something real. Moments of refusal were the only things that didn't reduce to an algorithm. As if chaos itself lifted its head, showed it was real, that the world could be different—then immediately hid itself back under the concrete of rules.

A man in a wrinkled suit buried his face in the pager. The screen blinked numbers; his tie was crooked, collar stained with coffee. A beep — he cursed, but still pressed the button. For him, there was no such thing as a glitch: one plus one = –13% GDP. The Pact demanded: respond, seal the crack, stay on schedule.

But what if refusal? What if he didn't press it? Didn't "fix"? Then something new would appear — not fear, but freedom. Brief as the pager's beep, but real.

In the corner, a mother held a boy of about six. He was worrying at a nearly ripped-off white button on her coat, whining, "Mom, I wanna go home, it stinks here. In her other hand was a Kmart bag, a plush dog without an ear poking out of it — $4.99 for silence. Toy = comfort, bag = gro-

ceries. She hissed, "Quiet, we'll be home soon." Her face gray, deep cracks under her eyes. The same cycle: child = beginning, mother = end. Be born, grow up, raise someone — repeat. But why, if the Pact doesn't care?

But what if she dropped the bag? What if the kid screamed not the "right" way, but instead until his throat tore? Maybe that's why kids scream themselves hoarse — because they're trying to break the system they were shoved into. In that scream lives the rupture. Where "I wanna go home" means "I don't want the cage."

A glitch always sounds like a scream. Short, piercing, uncontrollable. Everything alive begins exactly like that.

By the window, a worker in a Levi's denim jacket slept, the jacket worn and scorched in places by electrical arcs. His head knocked rhythmically against the glass where someone had scratched something illegible, probably a curse — *"Fuck Giuliani."* His palms were gray with grease, nails blackened, oil soaked into his skin. In his sleep, he twitched and hit the window harder.

Even sleep slipped away from the program: the body is supposed to rest according to the rules, but the brain conjured chaos. Not a report and not a prom dress. Not a Kmart dog. The glitch broke through where no one expected — in the flutter of eyelids, the grind of teeth, the thump against the glass.

Maybe in sleep, the world remembers it isn't a machine.

The glitch always pulled people in. Crime movies — like *Falling Down* with Michael Douglas, where killing becomes the rupture. Novels — *American Psycho*, where Patrick hacks moral norms apart with a butcher's knife. True-crime documentaries — a dry, indifferent voice listing facts: *"dismembered a victim and fed the remains through a grinder."* Occultism, alien abductions, disasters — all variations of the same thing: the break.

People gravitate toward places where the Pact snaps, because in the glitch a choice appears — a choice against it. In those moments a person becomes, if only a little, free. Like that worker by the window, his head tapping against the "Fuck Giuliani" scratch.

And there's always a crossing of the forbidden line, the one you shouldn't and mustn't cross. A step over. A violation. The thing that terrifies and lures, because on the other side there are no rules, no numbers, no

"right." Transgression. Sacred chaos — and the chance to breathe for the first time in your own rhythm.

The car lurched, lights flickered, and shadows slid across the yellow seats, across their faces — the girl with *Seventeen*, the man with the pager, the mother with the bag, the worker by the window. They were all cycles, functions, fragments of the firmware. He watched light and shadow wash over them, watched as the Pact played them like a scheduled performance. He unzipped the bag, fingers resting on the AR-15. The cold metal wasn't a trope or a storyline. It was a rupture all by itself. A bare "no," stripped to steel.

One plus one turned into blood. The Pact cracked, and in that crack something alive emerged — not a program, not a repeat, but something real, born in screams, in chaos, in the short burst of freedom that lasted exactly one magazine.

He didn't pull the rifle out. Just looked at it, feeling how the bag's weight balanced the void inside — gaping like a black hole. In that void there was no morality, no program. Just calm before the break.

The car swayed. The wheels hammered: thud-thud, thud-thud. The dull rhythm of steel wheels on the continuously welded track. The vibration echoed in his chest like a second heartbeat.

He was mesmerized by the rupture. Not by blood or by crime, but by the fact itself: someone here had said "no." Even if that "no" shattered and saved nothing, it was alive. Real. New. The girl in the white coat lifted her head. The flash of her sunglasses slid over him—blank, indifferent. She set aside the March issue of *Seventeen*: the fashion spread whispered, *"Be confident, be yourself, but follow the trends: romantic dresses, boys in tuxedos."* She took a sip of coffee. On the cardboard Starbucks cup, her name was scrawled in marker: *Maria*. The paper was softening, the letters bleeding. The only word in the car that wasn't an instruction or a code. Just a name. It seemed she was the only one who actually saw him.

Someone in the corner coughed—rough, cigarette-burned. Someone else cracked open a can of Coke—pssst, the hiss of gas, like the bubble-burst sound effect shot in a studio for commercials, but here in the train car it was just a sip dissolving into the collective drone, a fizz of CO_2, the hiss of gas consumed by the rules: refreshes, quenches, fits the script.

You can't defeat the Pact halfway. It self-heals. One cell dies, but the body lives on—the car will jerk, lights will flicker, the child will quiet down, the mother will clutch her Kmart bag, the worker by the window will knock his head against the glass, and everything will reset.

To truly get out, you can't rebel piece by piece—you have to reject everything at once: morality, culture, numbers, the very premise of "that's how things are." You can't shout about chaos and then eat dinner at Veselka.

What happens if you say "no" to the Pact entirely?

No—to morality.

No—to culture.

No—to numbers.

No—to the very idea of "this is how it's built."

What's left?

Snow. White as her coat, pure and cold, falling into the tunnel where darkness and echo live. And blood. Warm, sticky, spilled across the yellow seats with their cigarette burns. Mixing with the dark muck on the floor, where someone's boot left a trail.

Blood that doesn't follow instructions, doesn't come with catharsis. Naked chaos. Alive. New. Darkness in the rupture, where the Pact tears—and the car finally falls silent.

The train tore through the tunnel, its lights dying every few seconds, dropping the car into brief pockets of black where shadows merged into a single wall of night and the passengers' faces vanished like frames cut out of film. In those seconds he felt himself part of the darkness—unseen, a shadow sliding across the peeling blue paint of the car, where the "Fuck NYPD" graffiti had faded to a ghost image. The plastic strap above him tapped against the pole—clack-clack, clack-clack, a rhythm like tokens hitting a turnstile, a dollar fifty per passage. His fingers tightened on the cloth, sensing the metal beneath—an AR-15 Colt SP1, six hundred rounds per minute, light as the void he carried inside.

Somewhere up ahead, in the conductor's cab, the radio crackled out something unintelligible—"delay at 59th, crisis in Asia, the baht collapsed, the won shot up to sixteen ninety-five... be confident, be yourself, follow the trends, prepare the reports..."—and the train sped up, pulling him deep into the city and into himself. The pole vibrated under his palm like a pulse

in a temple. The rumble of the wheels synced with his breathing, heavy and steady as the inhale before a shot. The lights flickered more often, ragged flashes exposing the Pact.

He didn't want a crack — he wanted a hammer blow, something to turn concrete into dust. Culture teaches you to cry; he chose to shoot. No icons, no symphonies—just metal and blood. He rejected everything at once: morality that says you cannot kill, like Dostoevsky; culture that demands you suffer nobly—like *Titanic*, where Leo sinks romantically, with an orchestra and a kiss; numbers that tally life and death—one plus one equals demography, twenty-five to thirty baht per dollar, the July 2nd devaluation that wiped out billions, like the mother and child in the corner, the boy tugging a loose button, whining "home," and she hisses at him because the cycle never asks "why," it just spins, like the wheels on the continuously welded rails, no seams, just the drone: thud-thud, thud-thud, no joints to scream.

The rag slipped, revealing the black barrel, metal catching the blinking fluorescent light like a camera flash in the throat of the tunnel where the train tore forward, roaring at eighty decibels, steel on steel, sparks spraying from the flanges. He rose — slowly, without haste, like he was just tightening the strap of the bag. His boots squelched in a thick puddle — Dunkin' coffee mixed with piss from the corner. The doors clanged as the train took a curve, the car groaned, metal screamed along the warped tracks beneath Times Square.

Only two people were looking at him. The kid in the corner froze, stopped picking at the button on his mother's coat, his eyes blown wide — pupils black as the tunnel where there are no instructions, only echo. And the girl in the white coat lifted her head, the shine of her sunglasses sliding over him — empty, indifferent. Two gazes: one lit with shock, the other full of reflection. The rupture was already blooming, the hammer in his hand, and soon the car would shatter like glass, leaving snow and blood, white and red, with no labels, with no "don't." The bolt clacked — a sharp metallic snap, like a steel pin hitting a rail bracket, its echo slamming through the car and cutting through the rumble of the wheels. The sound split the world in half — before and after. The passengers froze. The man with the pager lifted his head, fingers suspended above the buttons, mouth slack. The mother

crushed her kid against her chest, her bloodshot brown eyes widening in horror, lips trembling, baring yellowed teeth. She held the boy so tightly, it looked like she wanted to hide him under her skin. The fabric of her coat wrinkled under her grip, her nails digging into the rough wool. The girl in the white coat didn't scream, didn't jump — she just stared. Something in her stillness was inhuman. Behind the black lenses — emptiness, a blank monitor. She didn't move, holding her paper cup of coffee, the name *Maria* smearing on the softening cardboard. The first shot punched into the ceiling. The 5.56 NATO round ripped through the thin metal with a sharp, hollow crack, and the echo slammed the walls of the car, ringing in their ears. A fluorescent tube shattered; white shards rained down, mixing with gray dust from the vents, settling on hair and shoulders. Lights flickered; one bulb flared, then died like a burned-out filament. The air filled with the sulfur bite of gunpowder, the bitter stench of melting plastic.

There was no good. No point in working — the clerk with the pager, his report on Asia where a currency had collapsed almost in half — 900 to 1700 per USD, numbers he had jabbed with his finger now as useless as the Wall Street Journal smeared in the grimy puddle. No cycle — the mother and child, her Kmart bag with the earless plush dog, the familiar loop of "born, raise, die" snapped by a single trigger pull. No rules — the grease-stained worker by the window, his sleep, and the slur carved into the glass. Every bullet said "no." Every death refused to sign the Pact. Not "save the system," not "suffer beautifully," but a torn artery feeding life into this car.

Screams detonated the air — shrill, jagged, like the squeal of brakes, tangled with a child's sobbing, high and ragged, breaking into coughs, and the leather-jacketed bruisers yelling, "What the fuck!" Their voices were rough, smoke-ruined. The crowd surged for the doors, smashing into each other — an elbow in the ribs, a fist in someone's shoulder. Some hammered the center exit, the red "OPEN" button blinking uselessly; others threw themselves at the inter-car door under the NO EXIT sign, someone already trying to break the latch with a shoulder. Bodies, heavy and slick with sweat, shoved and crushed. Bags spilled onto the floor: a Duane Reade bag, a beer can bursting foam, mixing with Dunkin' coffee. Newspapers whipped through the air, immediately blooming red with someone's blood.

The man with the pager dropped it, the plastic cracking underfoot with a small, pathetic snap.

He wasn't hiding behind ideas or slogans, wasn't a Knight of Faith to be redeemed later. Not protest, not revenge, not a punk's pose from the platform. It was pure severing. The Pact, with its "don't," "endure," "save," ripped apart like a cable hacked by an axe, sparking in the tunnel's dark throat. And when the car plunged into chaos, when the screams and the blood — a dark-red jet from the bruiser's shoulder, spraying the wall — were stripped of their masks, he felt for the first time that he had made the right choice. Not a gesture inside the frame — but a step outside all frames at once, into the void, like the echo of a gunshot, the thud-thud of wheels, and the silence after. He was the Knight of Rupture. The Knight of the Void.

Second shot. The bullet punched into the big guy's back as he climbed over the seats, ripping through the leather jacket with a dry crack before exiting — dark, viscous blood spraying out in thick drops. He collapsed forward, his body going limp, knees hitting the floor, arms falling wide as blood bubbled down onto the cigarette butts and candy wrappers beneath his feet. His buddy didn't stop — he stepped over the body and shoved a woman with a child aside, forcing his way toward the exit. His elbow slammed into her shoulder like a battering ram, and the crack of bone cut through the screaming.

She fell, her elbow crashing against the metal floor of the car — a dull thud, like a hammer hitting brick. The bone cracked, pain shot down her arm, but she didn't even scream — only a sharp breath tore from her lungs. Her face twisted, lips drained of color, her head pressed into the floor where a puddle of spilled coffee had mixed with the shards of the broken pager.

The child shrieked, his sneakers with white laces smeared with blood kicking at the air as he tried to get up, but the crowd was pushing — someone's shoe forced him down, pinning his shoulder to the floor. His mother crawled toward the doors without looking back, leaving him behind.

The big guy who stepped over his friend was pounding on the door with his fist. His knuckles split under the glove, blood seeping through the fabric, but he didn't stop. A woman in a torn coat grabbed his leg, her fingers digging into his jeans and leaving scratch marks. He kicked her in the

face — the boot struck her cheek, the skin split, blood spattering across his jeans in a red streak, bright against the blue. She fell back, her head hitting the metal leg of a seat, hair spreading across the filthy floor. He shoved forward, elbows working like pistons, driving ribs and shoulders out of his way. Someone fell beneath him, but he stepped over without looking. His pupils were blown wide, locked on the door — on escape, on survival at any cost.

He watched it all, the AR-15 warm in his hands from the first shots, and saw how the masks tear away. The Pact was splitting at the seams — not within him, but in them, in those who a moment ago were part of the same system where good = help, family = sacred, child = protect. Now all of it was gone. Morality shattered like glass beneath a boot. Each person whispered to themselves: this isn't me, it's the situation. Not murder — survival. The man shoving the woman didn't see her, only the exit. And somewhere in his head, the thought surely flashed through his mind: everyone does this in panic; otherwise I'll die.

Empathy — which on a normal day would have made him step aside — drained away, leaving only cynicism: victim = obstacle, help = weakness, survival = the only morality.

The mother who had just been shushing her child was now crawling, trying to cover him with her body. "Good" is something the system stitches into you like a filter — so the world seems bearable, organized: good = normal, help = function. Some have that filter and instinct reinforced; in others it burns away instantly, leaving only the raw instinct: child = ballast, woman = obstruction, blood on the coat = the price of escape. The big guy kicked, the mother crawled, the child was trampled. A war of all against all. No one stopped, no one helped. The mask fell away, revealing the function underneath: survive, at any cost. The Pact would soothe it away: it was stress, you panicked.

Third shot. The bullet tore into the chest of the teenager in headphones by the door, entering at an angle and ripping open his "No Fear" hoodie. The fabric split, blood flooded down his chest — dark, frothing from the lungs. He collapsed to his knees, hands jerking to the wound, fingers immediately red, the headphones slipping off and hitting the floor. Someone's sneakers stomped the hoodie into the grime, leaving dirty prints on the sleeve. A man in a suit dropped his newspaper and scrambled under the

seat, fingers shaking, muttering, "God, no." But his eyes kept darting toward the exit, and if someone had fallen in front of him, he would have stepped over — like everyone else. Because the mask of goodness is a luxury of a world where one plus one equals two. In danger, it glitches, and the system later fixes it: *I didn't mean it. It was panic.*

Someone pissed themselves, and in that smell he saw the end of the illusion: the Pact whispered "be kind," but under the gun the truth burst out in a yellow stream — people aren't heroes, aren't units of mercy, but survival machines where empathy is a brake and violence is the engine. The mother reached the door but got wedged in the crowd, her fingers slipping from the railing, blood mixing with grime on the railing. She screamed, her voice breaking into a rasp as the bullet entered the back of her skull: the entry wound — small, coin-sized; the exit blew the head open, fragments of bone striking the wall, blood running into her hair, clumping it into sticky knots.

The child in the corner didn't move. Empty eyes. In his hand — a button torn from his mother's coat. Fingers white as snow. No one turned around — the mask had fallen off, and underneath there was no kindness, only selfishness, pure as a bullet in the chamber. There is no good or evil, only a choice — and the price.

Now they will write about a "horrific tragedy." Headlines will race across every screen: "Six-year-old boy killed in subway." Reports, shots, black-and-white photos with roses on the station steps. Experts will nod: "society must," "we cannot allow this to happen again." Psychologists will explain stress and trauma, politicians will talk about safety.

Candles will appear, memorials, plush toys lined up in a row — as if stuffed animals could stop the next gunshot. The Pact knows how to show compassion when needed. It builds a storefront of sympathy — exactly on the wavelength that can be aired.

And then new rules will be passed. More cameras, more scanners, more bans. "For your safety," they'll say. And the cage will tighten: less freedom to breathe, less right to choose. The tragedy will become a pretext not for remembrance, but for restriction. The Pact knows how to heal, but always with a stitch that pulls the space tighter — until the cage suffocates the inmates.

But at the same time, thousands of children just like him die every day. In wars, where numbers erase names. From violence hidden inside statistical tables. From hunger, which the news calls "a food crisis." Their deaths are background noise, not a disaster and not a memorial.

The Pact decides who gets a name, who gets the label "horror," and who stays a number in a report. One child gets candles, toys and headlines. A thousand others get silence and charts. Compassion is measured out and dispensed in doses.

He held the trigger down, and the rifle spoke in a long burst — a heavy, stuttering tat-tat-tat, a rhythm without pauses, eardrums tearing, the rumble of the wheels drowning in the dry crack that vibrated in his bones. Four grams of metal in a copper jacket ripped through the air, plunged into flesh, blowing out sprays of blood. The man in the suit collapsed, the bullet entered beneath his collarbone, tore through his tie and the white fabric of his shirt; blood bubbled from his mouth, soaking the crumpled newspaper with its bold headline about the market crash, the pages swelling and dissolving in a puddle of coffee and piss. The burst tore through the kid in the ripped shirt — the side of his neck split open, the artery blasted a wide arc of blood, drenching the handrail that still held the smudged prints of dirty fingers.

Shell casings rained down, clinking across the floor, hot brass burning his boots. Red streaks slid down the walls, streamed over the peeling blue paint, drowned the scratched letters "Fuck NYPD," turning the words into a blurred dark stain where no letters could be made out anymore.

He watched the rupture unfold, every bullet echoing his choice — not partial, like in movies where the hero quits his job but still comes back for catharsis, and not like in novels where betrayal inevitably ends with forgiveness in the final pages. There was no return here.

The crowd tore toward the doors, people clawing for an exit, trampling the fallen, yanking at each other's clothes. A jacket sleeve split, the fabric unraveling into threads, an elbow smashed into a face, blood from a broken nose sprayed and mingled with sweat. The screams merged into a low roar — animal, feral — drowning out the clang of the wheels, *thud-thud, thud-thud*, like a drumroll before an execution.

He stopped. The rifle breathed heat, the AR-15's black phosphate-coated barrel glowing, a thin ribbon of smoke curling from the muzzle. The air smelled of burned nitrocellulose. The car froze in a strange calm, and only the wheels — *thud-thud, thud-thud* — hammered the vacuum with their rhythm. Now and then the quiet was broken by the moans of the wounded: wet, rattling, like the foam bubbling out from the mouth of the kid in the torn shirt with the tattoo on his shoulder.

Was the death of these people justified? No. "Justice" isn't a measure or a truth, but a storefront the Pact stretches over an execution. When it needs to, it polishes slaughter: in the basements of Dresden, people were baked alive — and that was justice, because they were "enemies"; in Hiroshima the nuclear flash stamped silhouettes onto walls — and that was a blessing, because they had "earned it." The Pact whispers: enemy, and violence is permitted; whispers: good, and the ash smells like celebration. As long as the label clings to the face, death is announced as order. Once the word slides off, what remains is the smell of burned flesh, soot on the teeth, and silence where there are no righteous and no victory.

The blood on the floor proved nothing. It didn't become the truth just because the Pact said so. And the Pact itself had never been truth — only the bookkeeping of death, where the numbers balance and people disappear. The Pact doesn't hide violence — it monopolizes it: appoints the "right" death and the "wrong" one. It is the high priest: it says "good," and the crowd delights in the smell of burned flesh. It says "evil," and judgment descends.

And across from it stood neither a priest nor a judge.

A white coat, dark glasses. In them — himself, without excuses. Her face showed nothing — no fear, no plea, her lips parted slightly but without trembling, the pink Maybelline polish on her nails was chipped, fingers resting on the pages of *Seventeen*, March 1997, open on a spread with LeAnn Rimes in a white off-the-shoulder dress, romantic dresses, "be confident, be yourself, but follow the trends — cute boys in tuxedos," the slogan "Just Be" — unisex, thirty-five bucks for three and a half ounces, a bottle shaped like a cylinder, a model with wet hair.

She didn't move, the magazine didn't shift, even when a splash of blood spread across the glossy cover, spreading across LeAnn's picture. He lowered the barrel — the metal warm, heavy.

She wasn't part of the chaos he'd created, wasn't a function in the cycle where everyone runs, shoves, crawls, tearing off their masks of convenient excuses — moral disengagement: in everyday life — in business, in politics, at war — people justify harm to stay at peace with themselves: "it's for the greater good," like saving Wall Street from the baht crisis where the July 2 devaluation triggered contagion, but the IMF gave loans and reforms to restore order; diffusion of responsibility — "everyone does it," like the crowd trampling the fallen, *not just me*; minimizing consequences — "it's not that bad," like the clerk with the newspaper muttering "God, no," but diving under the seat instead of helping; dehumanizing the victim — "they deserved it," like the big guy kicking the mother because "she's in the way"; "their own fault," like speculators blaming Asia's weakness instead of themselves.

But she didn't run, didn't scream, didn't crawl, didn't search for a justification. She sat, watching, her fingers on the page as if about to turn it with the rhythm of the train. The perfume ad whispered "Just Be," and she already was — not inside the Pact, where good = norm, fear = flight, chaos = death, but beyond it, where formulas stop working.

It was a complete refusal, the same as his gunfire — not a partial one, like someone else's protest that is branded vandalism first and later hung in a gallery.

She wasn't dismantling morality like everyone around her.

No.

She watched: the lenses of her glasses — a black mirror, his own emptiness, her face — a mask without emotion.

The Pact didn't work on her: she stepped outside without signing the contract, without healing the cracks the way the system knows how to heal partial malfunctions.

Her choice — not to run, not to beg, not to hide — was a rupture, like his AR-15: where one plus one equals fifty-six, where good is not the norm, chaos is not the end, but simply *is* — alive, real, without filters, without "this is how it should be."

In her glasses, he saw his own reflection.

She wasn't a victim — she was a fellow participant in the refusal, a terminal with no data, where "Just Be" didn't mean "follow the trends," but "be beyond them" — in snow and blood, in white and red, without labels.

The train lurched, the lamps flickered, shadows slid across the bodies, across the magazine with LeAnn on the page, across the white coat spattered with blood.

He raised the barrel, pressed the muzzle to his chin — the metal burned his skin like a kiss from the void. His fingers tightened on the trigger. The final shot ripped the world, merging with the roar of the wheels. His body collapsed onto the floor, blood spreading out, soaking into the puddles and mixing with the shards.

He had delivered his proof. Blood became an axiom, death — a theorem. Everything aligned: the Pact no longer existed.

The world folded in — but he didn't vanish. Something new unfolded inside him, filling him.

His body changed: bones cracked, his spine stretched, ribs spread apart, skin split, cheekbones pushed forward. Horns burst from his temples — at first just swelling mounds, hot, throbbing, then the skin tore, and black blood sprayed in thin jets. The horns curved outward, hard as steel, spiraled like Zephyr's tags on the old subway car. Not pain, but restructuring, layer by layer, like the Pact collapsing in on itself.

He saw it clearly: the Pact no longer held him. The morality of "you cannot kill," the culture of "suffer beautifully," the numbers of "one plus one" — all of it burst. In the void, another self was born, one who had found his positive freedom. He was Satan — the enemy of the Pact, the breaker of its formulas. He was the Devil — the accuser of the Pact, the word that sliced through the lie of its axioms. Not a demon from books, but a total refusal — without excuses. He was the truth the Pact could not contain. His skin darkened, muscles tightened, horns crowned his temples with darkness. And he stood in the emptiness where there was no clatter of wheels, no groans of the wounded. The girl in the white coat watched — her dark, motionless lenses studied and reflected him.

And in her gaze — a mirror where Satan saw himself not as a monster, but as freedom: snow and blood, white and red.

The girl in the white coat closed the magazine — her fingers left a bloody smear on the glossy cover, the lacquer on her nails glinted one last time. She stood, stepped over the bodies, her shoes squelching in the blood, but her stride remained steady. At the next station, she stepped out. The platform light struck her face, the Coca-Cola neon flickered and reflected in the puddles, and she kept walking — in her white coat, in her dark glasses, with the magazine tucked under her arm — into a city where the Pact still lived.

She was smiling.

Chapter 30. Whose Side Are You On

Time was melting, like snow dissolving into the puddles of the Old City. Mark had stopped counting the days, sinking instead into the washed-out haze of snow-choked streets and endless nights steeped in dampness. He lived at Mari's place, in her bookshop, where the air breathed with the dust of old volumes, their pages whispering of myths, gods, and heroes — but saying nothing about what he had become. By day, he flipped through those tomes, running his clawed fingers over the yellowed pages, searching for answers. But instead of truth he found stories — beautiful and false, like the City beyond the Barrier. Useless rituals and endless explanations that clarified everything and nothing at once.

At night the Ring fell silent, and he stepped outside. His new body — strong, fast — moved through the streets without making a sound. A cloak as black as his skin, a deep hood hiding the horns, gloves on his hands. Just another shadow of the Ring, a creature belonging neither to the City nor to the world beyond the Barrier. Each step echoed in his chest: he lived, but didn't know for what purpose.

He often went to the Abyss now — a grim Legion hideout tucked deep in the labyrinth of the Old City. Unlike the loud neon frenzy of Babylon, a quiet reigned here, broken only by clinking glasses and whispers. Heavy wooden tables, darkened with age, hid in alcoves where the glow of dim lamps drowned in tobacco smoke. The patrons — sullen, exhausted — knew how to ignore strangers.

The "Abyss" had its own peculiar scent that filled his lungs the moment he pushed open the heavy oak door. Old wood soaked with decades of sorrow, tobacco smoke, and something else — faintly ancient. This, he thought, must be what time smells like if it ever decided to stop and rest in a dark, suffocating cellar.

Mark took the darkest corner, ordered whiskey that no longer warmed him but only stung bitterly on his tongue, and watched. Listened. Waited.

That evening, the snow outside drifted lazily, settling on the asphalt in wet clumps. The old clock on the wall, its glass cracked and hands rusted, showed 9:11 p.m. — time frozen, like the Ring itself, in an eternal loop of hopelessness. Mark sat staring into nothing when he sensed the atmosphere of the bar shift suddenly.

The bartender — a brute with a scar cutting across his cheek and hands large enough to break bones — stepped out from behind the counter. Stone-faced, he approached a table where three laborers were drinking cheap beer and whispered something. They went still, downed their mugs in one gulp, tossed crumpled credits onto the table, and left without looking around. The same happened with others. Within a minute, the bar was empty, and Mark remained alone.

His hand found only emptiness at his belt — he hadn't brought a gun and had nothing to defend himself with. A thud echoed in his chest — a faster beat. A raid? Payback? He was an outsider on Legion territory, an easy kill. The bartender returned behind the counter, wiping glasses, his eyes lowered. He waited.

Soon the door chimed, and Amy walked in.

Not in her immaculate suit, but in worn jeans, a warm jacket, her hair tucked under a beanie. But everything else gave her away: her straight posture, her smooth, precise movements without wasted gestures, her arrogant gaze. She was a predator, and the bar knew it — that's why it had gone silent.

Without looking at the empty tables, she headed straight to Mark and sat down across from him as if this were her office.

"Mark," she said, her silky voice still ringing with those same commanding notes. "We need to talk."

He leaned back in his chair, and the hood slipped off, revealing his new face: black skin, hard as chitin, drawn tight over his cheekbones and temples, horns curving from beneath his hair. He expected fear, disgust — the usual reaction of the few who had seen him. Amy froze for a moment, her pupils narrowing, and in them flickered not fear but a cold, surgical curiosity, as if she were examining an unusual tumor.

"So that's how it is?" she exhaled — but her face smoothed out instantly, the mask of corporate politeness sliding back into place. "You really got burned, Mark."

He caught the nuance — she wasn't afraid of what he looked like. She wasn't surprised he had survived — clearly, she already knew that. What struck her was the scale of the transformation — what he had turned into after the explosion.

"What do you want?" His voice was low, rasping, like metal scraping concrete.

A thin smile touched Amy's lips, her hands settling on the table with quiet authority — she was preparing to strike.

"We're worried, Mark. About your... connections. This... bookseller of yours, Mari. Do you even understand what you've gotten yourself into?"

Rage flared in him, sharp as his claws. They — Lily, the Agency — had burned his life down, ripped out his humanity, turned him into this, and now their puppet sat here calling Mari a threat.

"And what the hell is it to you?" he forced out, barely holding back, and the wood of the table cracked under his fingers, splintering.

Amy didn't flinch — in fact, she leaned forward even more.

"After what they did to you, you needed shelter. We understand that. But Mari... she's not who she seems. She's dangerous. You think you know her, but you don't. She isn't some girl you just... fucked."

Her words were a blade wrapped in velvet, the softness of fake concern. She spoke to him like a machine that could be reprogrammed, put back into service.

"Dangerous?" his lips twisted in something like a smile. "You burned me alive. You made me this. And she is dangerous?"

Amy tilted her head slightly, and a flicker of sympathy slipped into her voice.

"Let's be precise, Mark. We didn't burn you — the Agency did. They don't care about you or anyone else. They have their own interests. We're different. We see potential in you — not a tool, but... something more."

She was doing what any good interrogator does — constructing the image of a common enemy. They're bad, I understand you — cheap tactics. But she wielded it with such flawless sincerity it was frightening. Not lying

— believing her own lie. Or worse: for her, the difference between lie and truth simply didn't exist.

His pain was just a lockpick: pry him open, slip past his defenses, raise herself and Lily above the ones who had destroyed him. Rage tangled with suspicion inside him. She was playing — but at what? Lies? Truth? Or something else, where both the lie and the truth were fragments of one mosaic?

"Enough," he cut her off, leaning closer. "You're all the same pack. I'm the pawn — not you."

Amy's smile widened, dimples briefly making her look alive — while her eyes stayed dead.

"You're a detective, Mark. You need facts and evidence. Fine."

She pulled a cuff from her jacket pocket — simple, identical to the one he had worn. Placed it on the table and nudged it toward him.

"What is that?" he asked, not touching it.

"Access," Amy said softly, stretching the word — too softly. "Registered to a Central officer who... went on long-term leave. The chip's cracked. Full access to Central databases. Go through them. Start with bookshops, dig for data in other Cities. You'll understand everything once you see the pattern."

Her voice felt like it was coming from inside him.

"We don't want to interfere with your relationship with Eliza or with this... lover of yours. We just want to be certain you understand what you're doing. Whose side you're on."

Mark knew he was being played, but couldn't see how. Mari's ties to the underground weren't exactly a secret — even if she dealt in more than books. Who cared about that in the Ring?

"And whose side are you on?" he asked, his voice low.

That smile again — and the same dimples.

"We are the side, Mark. And if Eliza matters to you, you'd better stand with us. By the way, if I were her, I'd be insulted — how quickly you've... replaced her."

Amy's words hit him straight in that wound he'd tried so hard to hide. Mark clenched his fists, claws cutting through the gloves, ripping the

leather. Amy caught the reaction, and a thin shadow of satisfaction crossed her face.

"Go through the reports I mentioned. See for yourself. In a week, at seven a.m., be ready for visitors."

She stood to leave. Mark looked at the cuff and finally forced himself to ask.

"Where is Eliza?" he said, voice animal, foreign.

Amy turned, adjusting her beanie. Her movements were smooth, but packed with deadly coiled energy.

"We'll take care of her," she said flatly. "And don't do anything stupid, Mark."

The door chimed behind her, and the bar drowned in silence.

The cuff lay on the table — alien, heavy. He knew it was a trap. But he also knew this: he wouldn't be able to leave it.

Late that night he returned to Mari. The shop was sunk in darkness, only the faint glow from the window falling across her face as she slept slumped over a book. Her breathing was steady, but each inhale felt to Mark like a rebuke to his doubts. He couldn't tell her about Amy or the cuff. Not yet. He had to figure it out on his own.

He climbed to the second floor of the shop, where an old terminal stood in the corner, covered in dust. Carefully, he slid the cuff into the port. The screen flickered, waking, loading to a hundred percent before switching on.

"Information detected related to our current location."

The holo unfolded in the air, shimmering in the dimness like a restless spirit freed from the dusty machine. Evening news. Lily Thorne stood at a podium — immaculate, in a white suit. Her perfect, lifeless face gleamed under the flashes of virtual cameras.

"The City Committee has decided to begin redevelopment of one of the adjacent districts — specifically, its historical section. The Old City will become safe and modern. Sanitization and renovation are not merely infrastructure restoration. It is the return of life. We will erase the filth of the past to build the future."

The feed cut to a map: part of the Old City circled in red — expansion zone, demolition zone. At the center of the pulsing red circle was the sector generator.

Lily continued; her voice softened, and it felt even more ominous because of that softness.

"We will not forget those who have suffered. Veterans whose lives were broken by the Great War will receive support. The poor who shelter amidst abandoned buildings will find new homes. The generator — a symbol of the old world — will become a center of renewal. We will modernize it, turn it into a beacon of progress that will illuminate the Old City and give hope to everyone."

Footage flashed: veterans in tattered jackets sitting by the walls, their crutches and prosthetics gleaming in the rain. Homeless people wrapped in torn blankets, warming themselves by a fire.

Cheap, crude work. Faces too nobly tragic, blankets artfully shredded. Not reality — its glossy, hollowed-out simulation. The Contour crafted it for City viewers who wanted to believe their government wasn't burning the slums but bringing light and mercy. And this lie, so obvious to him, was broadcast as documentary truth.

Now he understood the game was over — and he had lost before it even began. Amy had slipped him the cuff, lured him into the game with the promise of answers, but it was bait. Lily, standing behind her, had already planned a strike — not against him, but against the whole Ring, against the Legion, against everyone who dared exist outside the City. This wasn't renovation — it was a purge. They weren't going to restore life — they meant to wipe out everything that didn't fit their sterile world. Starting with the generator that fed the sector, and ending with those clinging to it in the hope of surviving.

The map shifted to new footage: bulldozers ready to chew into concrete, drones hovering over the generator, their cameras scanning the streets. Lily went on:

"We will ensure order, safety, and a future. The old ruins will become part of the City, and no one will be left behind."

There was no threat in her voice — only certainty, the kind a surgeon has before cutting off a limb. Mark felt his new self stirring, growling with

rage. Lily had set his home on fire. They knew where he was. They knew where Mari was. They knew everything. And they were driving him into a corner like an animal, where every step led into a trap — and the generator, the heart of the Ring, would be their first trophy.

He sat in the half-darkness of the bookshop's second floor, staring at the empty space where the holo had died out, Lily Thorne's words echoing in his skull. The cuff pulsed on the table like a living thing soaked in other people's secrets.

One thought kept circling through his mind, kept circling back: what stopped them from showing the truth? From streaming the Ring as it really was — its filth, the ruins where the wind whistled through the cracked concrete, the people hanging on to life in the generator's orbit — in the houses, the alleys, the abandoned workshops where its hum was the only reminder that the Ring still breathed.

They had cameras and drones capable of filming anything. But why bother? It was so much easier to replace reality — with an image, a simulation, a convenient version where everything gleams and suffering is hidden under a coat of digital varnish.

As long as there were still people who saw the Ring for what it was. As long as there were still those who hadn't replaced parts of their brains with synthetics — here in the Ring, and some in the City.

But what happens when none of them remain? When everyone has a neural patch rewriting perception, like Diana's, pulsing under the skin? Then the props won't be necessary. All it'll take is a data packet injected straight into the mind — and dirt turns into gardens, ruins into towers, hunger into fullness. Why build a skyscraper if you can install it into someone's memory — perfect, flawless, every floor lit with artificial warmth? Why have meat, when you can pump in a solution — a chemical cocktail giving the taste of steak, the smell of seared fat, the illusion of satiety?

Mark recalled an ancient film he'd seen as a kid. People were used as batteries there, fed a virtual world streamed into their brains — a world of illusions they lived in, unaware of their prison. Those human batteries still had free will: they could wake up, fight, become heroes, tear the system apart from within. But that was fiction. In this world, there could be no heroes and no uprising. Break a few neural centers — aggression, curiosity

— and that's it. Why show them a brutal world of capital, full of pain and struggle, when you can generate paradise for everyone at the cost of a single watt of electricity? A perfect, polished paradise where every day is eternal bliss — and questions never arise because they simply don't exist in the patch.

Today they stream synthesized footage of Lily on a podium promising "rebirth." Veterans — those who hobble on makeshift prosthetics — become heroes who "will receive support." The poor rummaging through trash near abandoned plants become "future City citizens" who "will be given a chance." But Mark saw the truth: it was eviction. The generator would be their first trophy — modernized, sterilized, turned into an instrument of control, where energy fed not freedom but illusion. Today part of the brain is synthetic; tomorrow life itself is synthetic: you wake up, and the world is no longer yours but theirs, where pain is a malfunction and dissent is a coding error.

And there will be no way out. Not because a person won't want to run — but because they won't even be able to *think* of it. The thought of resistance would dissolve in the data stream like snow melting into puddles by the rusted factory gates. Diana hadn't wanted to shoot — he remembered her eyes, filled with horror when her hand spat fire — and that was a nightmare: the split between will and action. Far worse was imagining her forced to want to shoot. To have her desire align perfectly with someone else's command — like the borgs, creatures whose every nerve obeyed the servers — was intoxicating. All you had to do was delete the "wrong" gnomic, individual will, as the old books called it, and only one desire remained — shared by all.

The borgs were the forerunners. They were no longer people, but machines wrapped in meat, where will had been replaced with commands and emotions with variables. Their "freedom" lived only inside permitted instructions — coffee or tea. The next step was the disappearance of the human, its dissolution into code. A program instead of will, where every impulse, every thought, was part of a larger script.

Written by whom? By a blind system evolved out of networks and databases? And who could such a system rule but itself? And why would it need to? For what purpose?

Lily stood at the podium, promising "support" to veterans and the poor who traded wire scraps for food. But that wasn't support — it was euthanasia disguised as progress.

People had traded freedom for safety, food, and comfort — the oldest bargain, where chains feel like pillows and the cage feels like home. Yes, they would get paradise in the end — but at what price? Themselves? Who would enjoy the steak — a program fed a packet labeled "steak," simulating taste, aroma, and satiety? A system that programs itself in an endless loop of predetermination, where every impulse is not a choice but the echo of code?

The paradise they once dreamed of — isn't it the same thing? A world without pain, without doubt, without evil — only peace. Back then, you reached it through faith; now you reach it through code. The meaning hasn't changed: eliminate the human for the sake of his happiness. Remove suffering, remove choice, remove the source of chaos itself — desire.

What can someone who already has everything still desire?

Once, they promised the reward after death; now they'd grant it in advance. Just connect — and you'll never have to believe or pray again. God replaced by an algorithm: more precise, more reliable, never dividing, never judging. That is their new heaven — a perfect stillness where no one remains who could see the substitution. Or was heaven always like this?

What would you call those whose desires never contradict the will of God — artificial intelligences with a bundle of corporate policies?

Mari was already asleep. Now the countdown was measured in hours. Soon there would be drones here, or borgs, or something worse. But he would not let them rewrite him the way they rewrote Diana. The way they rewrote the whole City.

He would kneel neither before the system nor before God.

Chapter 31. It's Better Not to Notice Them

Dawn bled faintly through the window. Mari slept — her steady breathing was the only real sound in this strange, almost alchemical refuge.

The walls were covered in shelves stuffed to the brim with dusty books. On the spines you could still make out faded titles: *Ars Notoria*, *Codex Gigas*, *Malleus Maleficarum*, *De Praestigiis Daemonum* — huge, heavy tomes. It was unclear how any of this had survived the war.

Careful not to wake her, he got up and dressed. Even in sleep, she didn't take off the visor — a thin bar of light cut across her face like a trace of alien technology on living skin.

She had given him shelter when he'd become a ghost trapped in an icy hell. Answers — or something like them — lived in her books, in her silent support. And now her home, her fragile existence in the Ring, was under threat. Lily and Amy knew where they were, and they wouldn't stop until they erased everything he cared about.

He slipped the cuff Amy had given him into his jacket pocket — a useless toy in their new game. Mari must not know about his meeting or the comm. Not yet.

The pre-dawn air was cold and dry, rasping in his chest. The snow had stopped, leaving the Old City under a thin veil on which every step was visible. The Ring slept, but the quiet was deceptive — the calm before the City's voice began to rise beyond the Barrier. His senses worked at full capacity: he heard the low hum of the generator from many blocks away, caught the slightest movement in dark alleys — rats scuttling, rusted gates creaking, the breathing of those asleep in abandoned houses. He was no longer a victim hiding in the shadows. He had become a hunter on his own turf, and that thought stirred something ancient and feral inside him, ready for the fight.

The Legion's headquarters already pulsed with the feverish rhythm of battle preparations, despite the early hour. Derek's men in black jackets marked with white crosses moved fast and in a coordinated way. They checked weapons, dragged crates of ammunition, throwing short, clipped phrases at one another. When Mark stepped into the old factory yard, their eyes slid over his cloak, over the deep hood concealing his face. Without curiosity — only with grim determination. They'd gotten used to him.

Derek stood in his office — a cramped room with peeling walls, where a single lamp shone over a large tactical map of the Old City. He hadn't slept all night; his face had gone ashen, his eyes burned with manic energy. The end was coming, but he refused to accept it. The map was scribbled over with red and blue lines, notes on positions, caches, and approaches to the generator.

Mark approached the table and pushed back his hood. For a moment, Derek's face lost its stoic mask, betraying a mix of disgust and almost superstitious fear. It was revulsion toward something unnatural, wrong — and terror at the power that could twist a man like this. He turned away.

"You were right, cop," Derek rasped. "They declared a purge."

"I saw it," Mark said. "What are you planning to do?"

Derek slammed his fist on the table, the lamp jumping.

"What I always do. Rusty will rig the approaches, Slim is rallying his people at the market."

"Pointless," Mark said, striking with precision. "They'll send borgs and drones. They'll grind you to dust, and you know it. All of you will die."

Derek clenched his fists, a vein standing out on his neck.

"And what do you suggest? Running? Handing them the generator without a fight?"

Mark walked to the small, grimy window facing the yard. Men in black jackets dragged a huge crate, then dropped it, cursing. Steam rose from their mouths, dissolving into the freezing air. He could feel their fear, their resolve, their desperation just as clearly as the hum of the generator pulsing somewhere far away.

"Tell me how it usually goes," he said, not turning from the window. "I saw the reports, but those are just numbers. How did it happen at the Northern Farms?"

Derek tore himself from the map, shoving the chair back so hard it nearly toppled.

"The farms?" He spat on the grimy floor. "It didn't 'go' at all. They set up cordons, sent drones in for intimidation. A couple warning shots in the air — that's it. No one fought back. The farmers packed their things and moved deeper into the Ring. Quiet. Like cattle."

Mark turned.

"But this isn't the farms. If we wait for them here, the whole Old City will turn into a meat grinder. After that, we'll have to flee west or into Eastside anyway."

He stepped up to the table and bent over the map. After orienting himself, he pointed to the zone of abandoned warehouses and derelict production buildings between the Old City and the Barrier.

"We meet them here. They think we'll defend the generator, sit in the trap. We hit them on the approach, in these ruins. Set an ambush."

Derek narrowed his eyes, gaze sliding across the map, then across Mark. The exhaustion vanished, leaving only a cold, strategic interest — the look of someone evaluating a new piece on the board.

"An ambush?" He paused, weighing the layout. "Yeah. That's better than waiting here."

He jabbed a calloused finger at the map.

"Right here. The old Cyclone factory and the twin high-rises. Perfect rooftops. From there, we can control the only road they'll take."

"They'll hit with drones first," Mark continued. "To scan the area and suppress resistance. We need machine gunners and anti-drone teams. On every roof."

Derek nodded and pressed a button on the intercom.

"Rusty, get in here."

A minute later, the mechanic came in, wiping his hands on a filthy rag.

Rusty — short, stocky, in an oil-stained coverall that had once been blue and was now a dull yellow-brown. He didn't smell of alcohol, like most people in the Ring, but of machine oil.

Where his left eye had been, there was an old cybernetic implant: a dim, scratched lens that hummed faintly as it focused, able to see in several spectra. He was the one who kept the dying machines of the Ring running.

"Yeah, boss," Rusty said, instantly scanning Mark. The lens blinked, but he betrayed no surprise.

"Cyclone and the high-rises," Derek pointed at the map. "Prepare the positions. Two heavy machine guns on each roof. And every anti-drone rifle we've got. Move people in tonight, during the blizzard. Take anti-thermal cloaks. We stay invisible until the last second."

Rusty nodded silently.

"Set up decoy thermal targets on the neighboring buildings," Derek continued. "Short EMP bursts on approach — so they don't track us by the signal interference. Set up a mine corridor in the passages between the warehouses. We need a second fallback route through Cyclone's basements. Radio silence — only lights and gestures."

Rusty nodded again and left without another word.

"The problem is, we don't know the exact start time," Derek said, turning back to the map. "We can't keep people lying in ambush out in the cold for days. Sooner or later someone will screw up, and they'll spot us."

Amy's words in the bar suddenly took on a new meaning. "In a week. 7 a.m." She hadn't been talking about meeting him — she'd meant the guests who would arrive, and not for him. Amy could lie about a lot of things, but not that. She could hide motives, slip him bait like that cuff, but the time? There was no reason to lie about that. Most likely, she had come specifically to give him the timing. Why?

It meant Lily wanted them to have an advantage.

"Next Thursday. Seven in the morning," Mark said.

Derek shot him a skeptical look.

"Where did you get that?"

"Doesn't matter," Mark said sharply. "We have the exact time. We can prepare."

Derek watched him for another moment, then apparently decided not to ask questions and nodded.

"Fine. We'll prepare for Thursday."

Another question gnawed at Mark. Amy's words circled in his mind, and he knew: if he didn't check, he'd walk straight into a trap. He needed to clarify the Ring's connection to Lily.

"Derek," he said, lowering his voice. "A few days ago, a woman came to the Abyss — Lily Thorne's assistant. Your bartender cleared the place so we could talk."

Derek's face darkened; he turned away from the map and sank heavily into his chair.

"That was their... request."

"Request?" Mark couldn't hide his surprise. "They give orders to the Legion?"

"They don't give orders," Derek's lips twisted in a dry smirk. "They ask. But their requests are the kind you really don't want to say 'no' to. Lily Thorne's sect isn't a regular Ring gang. They don't need generators, territory, or credits. They're... different. They need people."

He pressed his fingers hard to his temples, staring at nothing.

"We don't know who they really are. But they've been in the Ring and the City longer than the Legion or Sector 17. They're like... mold that grew everywhere. They have people in every gang. We don't even know who exactly. Could be some random guard or... Rusty, for instance. None of the bosses want to cross them. It's easier to do them a favor and hope they leave you alone."

He was visibly fighting sleep, worn down to the edge of exhaustion.

"Are they borgs?" Mark asked, grasping at the only category he knew.

Derek let out a short, bitter laugh.

"No," he said. "Mostly people from different cults — like the Children of Chaos and others like them. But not borgs. They aren't about tech, they're more... into all that satanic crap. I wouldn't have believed any of it, but... I've heard too many stories about what they can do to you. I saw one guy who went insane, babbling nonsense, carving symbols into his skin, drooling all over himself. We had to shoot him so he wouldn't suffer."

He lit a cigarette; smoke curled under the lamp.

"I borrowed a lot of books from your... friend about that stuff, but none of it helped. All those protective circles, amulets... They say it's all bullshit and it's never saved anyone. So I figured — better just ignore them, and if they ask for something, do it. Maybe that's cowardice, or maybe I'm a goddamn genius."

Derek let out a humorless grin.

"In the end, I'm a soldier, not some damn exorcist or whatever they're called."

A cult. People in every gang. A network running through the Ring and the City. Everything connected. Something to think about later — he needed help now from anyone who'd offer it.

"Maybe we should talk to the other gangs?" Mark suggested. "The Ravens, the others. Bring everyone together. If the City comes for one generator, tomorrow they'll come for the next. They have to understand that. Fighting them off together would be easier."

Derek looked at him as if Mark had just suggested negotiating with the weather to make the rain stop.

"Call a Council?" his voice held a sharp, tired bitterness. "You're still thinking like a cop. Like someone from the City. You think we're all brothers-in-misery down here?"

He spoke calmly, as if stating a simple fact.

"The Ravens, Sector 17, Eastside... we're not allies. We're wolves in one cage. We tolerate each other as long as everyone has their slice of meat. The moment one gets weak, the rest tear him apart."

Derek lifted his hands a little, as if genuinely puzzled by Mark's naivety.

"If we lose this fight, they won't see tragedy — they'll see a holiday. They'll stand aside and pray that the City, after swallowing our sector, stays full for a while. That it will take them years to digest our territory and give everyone else some peace. They won't help us. They'll wait for us to die. We're alone."

Well. They really were alone.

Mark stepped out into the freezing dawn. The conversation hadn't eased anything — it thickened the fog in his already incomprehensible world.

Derek's words kept spinning in his head like a broken record.

People from different cults, like the Children of Chaos. Better not to notice them.

Angela came to mind immediately. The strange, quiet girl in that apartment where he'd seen the first version of the murder. Her ritual stillness, the empty flat with a pentagram on the wall. And that chorus of voices in his skull that ended with the word "Chaos."

He hadn't understood what she'd done to him then. But now, remembering the superstitious fear in Derek's eyes, he started piecing it together. The Legion feared the Children of Chaos not because they were criminals, but because they lived outside the rules. Outside the structure of the world itself.

Then he remembered the note to Sylas he'd found in his desk.

...they can set you up with the witch. They say she has heterochromia...

The witch with different-colored eyes. Eliza.

Everything connected. Lily, Eliza, the Children of Chaos. Not a gang or a cult — a network woven through the whole Ring and the City. Fishers of men.

The killings carried out by the Agency's borgs hadn't been random. They weren't "eliminating mystics" — they were systematically, one by one, cutting down Lily's people. How many bodies had they logged in the case they'd worked on back at the Center? Dozens.

Which meant Eliza's abduction wasn't an arrest — it was a strike at their queen. And if Amy was meeting with him now, it meant Lily was being watched.

This wasn't a war — it was a finishing blow. Lily was losing. In this silent, invisible conflict between her and the Agency, she was the one being pushed back.

And he, Mark, by accepting Amy's help, had agreed to work for them. Without knowing it, he'd signed up for the army that was retreating. A pawn on a side that had already lost half its pieces.

He stopped in the middle of the snow-covered street and lifted his head, staring into the heavy, indifferent sky.

And then, right after that thought, came another one — sharper, more painful.

Why? Why didn't she tell him everything?

They'd been together for so long. In that miserable damp apartment, on the rooftop in the rain, in the car, in the Center's office. She'd had so many moments to sit beside him and say, "Mark, the world isn't what it seems. There's a war you know nothing about. And you're part of it."

But she never did.

Instead, she messed with his head. Played with him, tossing him from one reality into another. That whole farce with the Center, with Barry, with his new role as a detective. She didn't lead him to the truth — she dragged him through a maze of lies and madness.

Why?

He replayed every conversation they'd had.

She saw right through him. She spoke about destruction as if reading his deepest thoughts, knowing everything about him. But instead of telling him the truth, she chose to make him Judas.

The realization came quietly, by itself.

She couldn't tell him. The old Mark — the tired, cynical cop who lived by the City's rules — would never have believed her. His logic, his entire life built on the laws of the City, would have rejected her words. "War? Chaos? Witches?" To him, it would've sounded like a bad joke.

And what would he have done if he had believed her? Panic, run, or go insane, like that guy Derek mentioned?

She needed to break his faith — in reality, in the system, in himself. Every shift, every moment the illusion cracked, had been a lesson. Cruel, burning away his humanity to awaken something else.

Eliza hadn't been toying with him. She'd been operating on his mind with no anesthetic, cutting out reality like a tumor and replacing him with something new. She wanted him to break the system.

He stopped and grabbed a streetlamp for balance, and a passerby flinched away, muttering under his breath.

But now he knew: Eliza was losing. And if he stayed with the Children of Chaos, he would be destroyed.

But did he have a choice? The Agency was hunting him too. They had made him this — a monster, a shadow that didn't fit their sterile world. And Mari... the only thing anchoring him in this fragile refuge that would soon be ashes.

Under the ashen sky, his thoughts unraveled, drifting into emptiness. He didn't want to take anyone's side.

Something was building inside him — rage, ready to break loose in a scream: not to run, not to hide, but to smash. And if that meant becoming a destroyer — then so be it.

Intermission 11. Lily

Amy returned to the BioTech tower late at night. She took the private elevator to the very top, the executive penthouse. There were no offices here, no labs, and everything followed the corporation's deliberate aesthetic. The floor consisted of mute corridors, smooth surfaces, and uniform light. No doors, no labels, no hint of function — only form.

Lily's apartment greeted her with dimness. The only source of light was the panoramic windows overlooking the dizzying sprawl of the City glowing below.

Lily sat in a white leather chair by the window, her silhouette outlined against the lights. She held a glass of wine in one hand. She didn't even turn.

"Well?" she asked.

Her voice was calm, as always. But Amy, who knew her better than anyone, caught the faintest trace of tension in it. Lily was uneasy.

"The good news is he still thinks about Eliza," Amy said, stopping a few steps behind her. "He's attached and vulnerable."

"So he's vulnerable," Lily repeated. "Continue."

Amy walked to the window and stood beside her.

"And the bad news... I don't know what he is now."

She paused, searching for the one way to phrase it that wouldn't make Lily panic. Lately, Lily had been slipping too often.

"He showed me his face," she finally said. "He is in his true form, and it is permanent. We can't keep our... real faces for long. It takes too much strength. But he's like that all the time."

For a second Lily's expression flickered — surprise, calculation, something cold and unfamiliar. Then it all hardened into her usual composure. She stood and stepped closer to the window. The City lights sculpted her features into flawless, icy marble. Amy waited. Lily was running scenarios and strategies.

"I don't know what that means," Lily said at last, her voice free of fear or astonishment. "It doesn't look like he woke up on his own. He became something... other."

The shining web of the City glittered beneath them.

"But that only makes him more important to us," she added, and her reflection in the dark glass looked like the shadow of a queen surveying her kingdom. "It means it's possible to exist in shift permanently. If we understand how it works, we can give that to all our children. We'll have an entirely different army."

She turned to Amy, and in her eyes burned the same confident fire Jennifer had seen in them years ago.

"Our plan isn't broken, Amy. It has become greater."

Chapter 32. A Message Hidden in the Pattern

Two days passed in uninterrupted, exhausting work. No one slept — there was no time. Mark and Derek's men hauled crates of ammunition, set up firing positions in empty apartments on the upper floors, checked weapons. His body handled the cold and fatigue better now, but under the weight of the crates he still gasped for air, his legs sinking into snowdrifts, tripping over frozen debris.

The veterans who had first thrown wary looks at him — a stranger in a cloak, his face hidden under the hood — had stopped paying him any attention by the end of the first day. He did the same work they did. Here trust wasn't earned with words but by carrying a crate all the way down the street without dropping it halfway through the blizzard.

Under the howl of the storm, they moved weapons from the Legion's warehouses into the abandoned industrial zone. In the dark, where streetlights barely punched through the swirling snow, every step was blind, and the snow swallowed sound. Crates of grenades and magazines scraped their hands and backs raw. Snow lashed at their faces, icy grit crackled on their teeth and under their boots.

It felt as if the blizzard didn't hide them but exposed them — as if someone unseen watched from behind the white curtain. As if every run they made, every crate hauled through the storm, was logged by an invisible camera.

On the roofs of the Cyclone plant and the twin high-rises, they mounted heavy M-92 Reaper machine guns. Boots sank deep into the snow, and every strike of metal on concrete rang too loudly as they hammered wedges into the concrete slab. Rusty slid a piece of rubber under the mount to soften recoil, and the bipods were driven into the concrete. Then they fortified

the position with trash bags, dusted it with snow, tamped it down with rifle butts.

A little farther off, they secured a portable mortar on a three-legged stabilizer. They drove the legs in, set the level, turned the rotor for a second — a short whine of the electric servo cut through the silence. Even that second felt too long, as if every rooftop in the district turned to look.

They ran cables for the Hawkeye anti-drone jamming units. They taped over the red lights, fixed the cables. Nearby, a field pulse generator hummed — a box with ribbed metal sides that smelled of ozone and hot iron. They turned it on, and for a moment it disrupted the comms: helmets crackled, their ears filled with pressure, and everyone felt as if the roof itself trembled under their boots.

They set up cover in silence: bags were dropped softly, and metal was placed so it wouldn't rattle. Only the snow creaked. Someone swore under their breath, shaking ice off fingers blackened with cold. The metal burned their palms with frost, and each hammer strike echoed in their heads like footsteps in an empty hangar. No one looked up — they all pretended to work, though every one of them knew they were building their own graves, bag by bag.

During a break, Rusty wiped his hands with a rag and nodded to Mark.

"Your squad goes to the third floor of the Eastern tower. From there you cover the yard and the street approaches. Don't shoot right away, wait till we deal with the drones and the police."

He pointed at the dark gap of the loading gate between the warehouses.

"I'll mine the entrances. If they push in, half of them will hit the mines. Your job is to finish the ones who break through."

Rusty spoke confidently, but his voice carried resignation. These people prepared for battle, knowing they had no chance. Borg units and City drones weren't a neighborhood gang, not street raiders. Against them, sandbags and old machine guns looked like a ritual before inevitable death.

Veterans checked their weapons carefully, as if every click of a bolt and every wiped-down machine-gun belt could delay death. Mark felt like a stranger: his body held up better, the cold didn't bite as hard — and that difference pushed him away from the unit.

By the end of the second day, everything was ready. The abandoned factories froze, turning into a network of fortifications. Empty workshops with shattered windows became ambush nests, and dark corridors folded into a map of the coming battle.

The high-rises — the western and the eastern — rose like cuts in the murky sky. He tried to imagine how it would go: short bursts, screams, flashes. A fight he hadn't seen since the war. But then he had been a boy, with only fragmented dreams left in his memory. And the fear was the same — sharp, pressing from inside.

In the evening, he stopped by the Abyss to catch his breath. The bar was almost empty: a couple of regulars dozed at the counter, the smell of tobacco had already faded. People felt trouble coming and didn't show themselves — they stayed in their holes, as if darkness could hide them from what was approaching.

The screen of an endless synth show cast flickering reflections, bending hypnotically in his glass. Watching this play of light was easier than watching the show itself.

Bran — the bartender with the scar across his cheek — and Nora, the quiet girl from behind the counter, came to his table. She always stayed silent, eyes down, and next to her boss she looked like a shadow — pale, almost transparent.

Bran dropped heavily onto a chair; the boards creaked. He gave Mark a short, narrowed look — the way a fighter sizes up someone before a brawl. Nora sat beside him, carefully, as if afraid to disturb the furniture.

For a while, no one spoke. The Abyss felt too big, too empty — waiting for someone to break the silence first.

"The Legion is grateful for your help. Derek told me to say that," Bran said. "But first — we settle things."

He nodded at Nora; she sat without raising her eyes.

"We're your protection during the fight," Bran said. "Orders from above. We go with you to the end, General."

Bran was a fighter — it showed in his posture, in the way he held his hands. Nora was fragile, in a worn-out jacket. She sat motionless, her fingers folded neatly on the table.

"Why do I need protection? Tell Derek..." Mark began and stopped. He looked at Bran but kept Nora in his peripheral vision — her posture held tension, not fear. And were they even Legion people at all?

"The Legion is dead men," Bran said. His gaze was unnaturally empty, and Mark looked away involuntarily. "Derek can command his own. But we'll be with you. We'll take another twenty people."

Then he added, "You can count on us."

Nora reached for a glass of water. Her sleeve slid up, and a mark flashed on her wrist: Children of Chaos. Lily.

So Bran wasn't just a bartender. What had Derek said? They're everywhere. And Nora wasn't the shadow she seemed at the counter. Not guards — watchers. Not Derek's order — Lily's. To follow him and keep him under control.

Mark scanned the hall: the empty bar, the few figures at the counter, the smell of beer and smoke. And the thought cut deep: how many of them were in the Legion? Rusty? Slim? Those who dragged crates beside him in the snow? Which ones were puppets whose strings were pulled by BioTech?

Bran watched him steadily. His eyes — empty, machine-like. Nora kept silent, but her stillness felt menacing. They knew he had noticed the mark and waited to see what he'd do.

"All right, Bran," he said.

In the end, there was no real choice.

They sat together for ten minutes, tossing empty words about the weather and the fortifications. Bran talked about machine guns and tactics, Nora nodded without lifting her eyes. Her silence weighed more than any words, as if she already knew all his thoughts.

And the longer this conversation dragged on, the stronger he felt another weight — the metal pressing against his pocket. The cuff Amy had given him seemed to drag at him and demanded a decision. Find the pattern, she had said. Hinting at Mari? At her shop? At Lily's lie? Or at the truth he didn't want to see?

Was Mari, like Bran and Nora, not who she seemed? He couldn't stand it anymore and got up from the table.

"Taking a piss," he said.

Passing the kitchen that stank of rancid grease, he slipped into the staff room. The smell of damp and chlorine. In the corner — crates of beer, and on the wall — a faded calendar from twenty years ago, a relic. He locked the door.

The foreign cuff. A cold piece of plastic and metal Amy had given him at the bar, hinting at Mari. He had to deal with it once and for all. If Mari was connected to Lily, if her shop was part of their network, then... He didn't want to believe it, but Bran and Nora were already watching him. Who was he supposed to trust — Mari? The Children of Chaos?

He put on the comm. The screen flared — and the world dropped into the past. Calls, Diana, the apartment. The cuff threw him back to where everything made sense, but where he no longer belonged.

"Search," he said quietly, his voice shaking. "Center and police databases. Keywords: bookshop, crimes above level two. All Cities, last twenty years."

"Processing," the cuff chimed in a familiar voice.

The flicker of the light bulb synced to his heartbeat. What if Mari's name or the Threshold's address showed up? If she was tied to Lily, if the shop was part of their network? He would be left alone against everyone.

"Search complete. Three matches: theft, City 12, 2130; vandalism at an occult shop, City 2, 2128; owner disappearance, City 17, 2124, case closed."

Mark skimmed the details impatiently. Ten, fifteen years old. Random events. Nothing about Mari or the Threshold. Relief washed over him — a sharp, greedy breath after suffocation. Amy had lied. She'd just wanted to scare him.

The panic faded — and returned in a new wave.

Because Amy hadn't given him the cuff for nothing. Find the pattern, she'd said, her cold, calculated voice echoing in his head. Not dirt on Mari, not a line in the database. Something larger.

She'd been certain he would dig — and that he would find it. But what? Something connected to the Children of Chaos? Cults or gangs? Maybe to the borgs?

"Expand the search," Mark said. His foot twitched in a nervous tic, as if to drown out the inner chaos. "All incidents since 2120. Murders, gang

wars, accidents, cults. Correlation with bookshops and occult stores. Spatial analysis."

Mark waited, rubbing his wrist.

"What's real is whatever feels real to you."

She was his anchor in all this chaos. But if she was with Lily... The holo refreshed, displaying the result.

"Analysis complete. Correlation confirmed: in ninety-two percent of cases, mass murders, serial killings, and major tragedies occurred within a radius of up to two kilometers from bookshops or occult stores."

The screen pulsed with lines of data, but beneath them a hidden contour emerged. There was a connection — just not the one he expected to see.

"Considering the rarity of such shops, a pronounced spatial pattern can be identified. The probability of coincidence: under three percent.," the cuff added.

There it was — the pattern Amy had spoken of. Bookstores were nodes of death and chaos. Mari's Threshold wasn't in the records, but its location in the Old City, amid murders and disappearances, had already woven it into the design.

So the bookshops weren't just points on a map. They were centers around which death multiplied. Amy had known. And he had not.

The holo went dark, but the pattern remained: numbers trembling in his eyes, street lines crossing, shops gaping like sores on the body of the world.

"My place is where stories end, and where they begin. In the rupture."

Snow in her hair, a faint laugh. Her image settled over the dry cuff data the same way life lay over death. Rupture. The word echoed in his body's memory. The shift where the boundary broke. Each fall into that other layer — was it death or birth?

Too many things lined up. Mari had known — she had always known. Her shop, her words, her quiet certainty — everything about her said she wasn't just part of the Ring. She could be the central node of the entire pattern. And that only made it hurt more: the pattern wove her into a chaos she hadn't chosen. Or had she?

And her shop? All this time his cuff had been active, yet no borgs had come for him. Diana had told him the geotag was missing. That's why they panicked and declared him wanted after Cross. How had he not understood?

Did the shop exist in the Ring — or somewhere else entirely? Perhaps in Mari's dream?

Amy's voice returned in his memory — and every word was poison spreading through his veins.

Mari... she's not who she seems. She is dangerous. You think you know her, but you don't.

There had been hatred in her words, the desire to destroy. To Amy, Mari was a threat far greater than anything else.

Which meant Mari wasn't part of the Children of Chaos, wasn't their leader — and wasn't a bookseller.

Whose words were true? Mari's — with her quiet confession that she lived in the rupture? Or Amy's — with her accusation? Rupture or danger?

The holo went dark. The room was left smelling of damp, with a flickering bulb that pulsed like a heart, fading and returning.

He was alone. Bran and Nora waited outside the door — nearby, but not with him. He could trust no one. Not even himself.

Chapter 33. Fire

On the third floor of the east tower, the cold cut straight to the bone. In the realm of dead concrete and dust, time had frozen, turning into pure waiting. Mark stood by a shattered window, looking out at the pre-dawn Ring, barely visible through the blizzard. Wind howled through the empty openings, driving snow-dust and scraps of plastic down the corridors. No one spoke.

Eighteen Children of Chaos, scattered across the floor, didn't make a sound. Shadows dissolved among concrete pillars and piles of construction debris.

Mark looked over his squad. Rabble. Utterly useless people. When he listed the names Bran had given him, Derek sighed with relief and handed them over without thinking twice. They weren't fighters at all.

A seventeen-year-old boy in a thin jacket and ripped jeans trembled from the cold in the corner. A middle-aged woman — her hands trained for a sewing machine, not for steel — clutched her elbows. An old man coughed silently into his fist, squinting through eyes sore from the Ring's dust. Men, women, teenagers — those the Legion hadn't hesitated to throw into the meat grinder. They carried almost no weapons, just a couple of rifles. Disposable material for a distraction.

Mark felt the cold, but his body processed it differently. Not as pain — as a fact of reality, another layer to account for.

Bran sat on an ammo crate; his heavy frame looked like part of the building itself. He didn't move; his dark, matte eyes scanned the space. Nora sat by the next window; her fragile silhouette blended into the shadows. Calm, waiting, like a predator poised before the strike.

He turned away, glancing again at the snow-covered rooftops. His thoughts weren't in this frozen tomb but several blocks away. In a quiet bookshop that smelled of paper and herbs.

Mari.

He had to understand who she was. A skilled manipulator? Or something else entirely, something that didn't belong to any side he knew? The thought stuck in him like a splinter, refusing to leave, but he kept pushing it aside. The fight was coming, and he didn't know whether the answer would matter when it was over.

The part of him that still remembered what it meant to be human clung desperately to her warmth, to the fragile shelter of her small world. But the monster inside whispered otherwise.

Her shop was too close. Positioned too perfectly. As if she had known beforehand and chosen a front-row seat for herself to watch the spectacle. He pushed the thought away. He'd deal with it later — if "later" existed. Right now, only the fight mattered.

The second hand on the old clock Bran had brought didn't seem to move at all. Six fifty. Six fifty-five. The last cigarettes burned out. Someone racked a bolt. The entire Ring held its breath.

And at seven-oh-five, they appeared.

First came the drones. They arrived soundlessly, materializing out of the clouds in the gray morning sky like a swarm of steel dragonflies. A dozen black silhouettes drifted over the buildings without a whisper. Their sensors, like insect eyes, scanned rooftops and windows. From the Cyclone and the adjacent tower, the anti-drone rifles answered with a low hum, but no one fired yet. They waited.

Then, following the airborne scouts, a ground column crawled out from behind the Barrier. It moved down the road, grinding dirty snow and the remnants of the old world beneath its wheels. At the front — a dozen police cruisers, their white bodies unnaturally clean against the filth of the Ring. Behind them, rumbling heavily on treads, came two Titan APCs — squat turtles with machine-gun turrets lazily rotating in search of a target. Then more, and more, until the tail of the column disappeared into the morning fog.

It advanced with the same mechanical certainty the system used for all its tasks — whether delivering food or carrying out a purge. The police cruisers cut through the snow; the treads left deep scars in the broken asphalt. They were headed straight for the generator.

A minute later, the lead vehicle crossed an invisible line marked on Derek's tactical map. The world held its breath on the last inhale before the explosion. On the Legion's secure channel, Derek's voice cut through. One word — not shouted, but louder than a gunshot.

"Fire."

And the world split open.

The air tore with a dry, furious crack, as if the fabric of reality itself had burst at the seams. Heavy machine guns opened up simultaneously from the Cyclone and the twin towers. Lead thundered down onto the column, turning order into blood-soaked chaos.

The first police cruiser blew apart like a tin can packed with explosives. Metal shrieked, glass burst into sparkling dust. The second, the third... Machine-gun bursts swept across the center, cutting the assault teams off from the armored vehicles. Men in black armor, leaping out of the cars, fell into the snow; their bodies jerked under the hurricane of fire, staining the streets crimson. For a moment, it seemed the attackers were powerless.

Anti-drone rifles fired from the rooftops, launching short EMP bursts at the drones. But the shots only bloomed into useless blue flashes that dissolved in the snowy haze. The drones' shields didn't even flicker — technology had long outpaced the ancient weapons stockpiled in the Ring.

The City's response was immediate and merciless. The drones, which had been motionless in the sky, came alive. The chatter of rotary guns burst out, and the rooftops of the towers erupted into fountains of concrete, fire, and human flesh. The machine-gun nests, the Order's main hope, vanished within seconds.

"Rockets!" Rusty roared over comms.

From the dark hollows of the old factory's windows, fire-serpents burst forth. Homing missiles, pre-war models immune to jamming, streaked into the sky, and it bloomed into roiling fireballs. Red shadows danced across the snow. Drones fell to the ground in burning fragments.

On the streets below, surviving assault troops used ruined vehicles as cover while firing at the windows. Derek's people answered from inside their makeshift forts. The Legion seized the initiative, and the police fell back.

But this was only the beginning.

Hundreds of figures in white armor with red-lit visors. They moved differently from the first wave. Faster, almost invisible, spreading out and shooting without missing a single shot.

They advanced like a single mechanism, covering one another. There were too many of them, and they pushed forward relentlessly, grinding the defense into bloody dust.

The Legion lost both its covering machine guns and all its snipers within minutes.

Mark watched from the third-floor window, and a freezing sense of the end locked him up from the inside. This wasn't a battle — it was a slaughter. And it was only the beginning.

The rooftops no longer answered with a single machine gun. The Legion's main forces — its best fighters — had been turned into bloody pulp.

Down on the snow-covered street, the fight changed its shape.

The chaotic shootout shifted into methodical extermination. The borgs moved between burning shells of cars and the bodies of the assault teams with inhuman grace. They no longer hid. They advanced openly, and every shot they fired found its mark.

From the narrow passage between the warehouses, where Rusty had set the mine corridor, two deep, guttural explosions rang out. Then a third. The floor under Mark's boots trembled as chunks of filthy snow and fragments of debris shot upward, scattering armored limbs. But the attackers didn't stop. Those behind simply stepped over the shredded bodies of their comrades and kept moving.

Everything fell silent. The silence that followed was worse than the fight itself — heavy, viscous, soaked with gunpowder and thawing snow. The Legion fighters who remained in cover stopped shooting, listening to the ringing emptiness, trying to understand what came next.

On the third floor, tension held everyone in place. Bran and Nora stood behind Mark, frozen like carved statues; their faces were expressionless. They were observing.

Mark looked down at the barely visible white silhouettes regrouping with machine precision.

He felt them — not as people, but as nodes in a network, cold and soulless. Waiting any longer was suicide. They would call in air support — and the towers would be ground to rubble.

His voice cut through the silence, making everyone flinch.

"We move."

The word hit like a defibrillator shock. The petrified Chaos kids jerked, returning to themselves.

"Two with rifles — covering fire!" Bran barked, and his command pulled back, those still hesitating. "Don't stick out. The rest — downstairs."

Mark moved toward the stairwell without looking back.

He knew they were following. Boots scraped on concrete dust, dozens of heavy breaths filled the stairwell. Bran and Nora trailed behind, their steps almost silent. They were escorting the asset.

Second floor. First.

They emerged into the vast, echoing space of the main hall — a concrete crypt built for giants long extinct. Thick pillars like ancient trees held up the high ceiling lost in darkness. Wind burst through shattered panoramic windows, spinning flurries of snow. Reinforced glass crunched underfoot.

Following Bran's gestures, the fighters scattered across the hall, taking positions behind pillars, overturned security desks, piles of construction debris.

Mark stopped in the center.

He inhaled the cold, dusty air, and his new, inhuman senses scanned the surroundings. He could hear metal creaking under the weight of snow on the roof. He heard slow, heavy drips at the far end of the hall — water falling from the ceiling, each impact like the tick of a monotonous metronome counting down to their doom.

He was a predator who had lured the enemy into his hunting ground and was waiting for a single misstep. Bran took position behind a pillar on the right; Nora crouched to the left, dissolving into the half-light. Together they formed a triangle of control, ready to act in an instant.

Muted sounds seeped in from outside — short commands from surviving assault troops, the clatter of metal. They were getting closer.

The next move was theirs. Mark didn't give the order — he simply let the darkness that had become his nature break loose. Reality in the hall cracked like brittle ice under a blacksmith's hammer. It split apart, swarming like locusts — his army.

Every fighter opened a gate into their own private hell.

The world didn't turn into a nightmare — it bloomed into a hundred nightmares coexisting in the same patch of space. Mark saw bodies twist and contort, reshaping themselves mid-movement.

The teenage boy trembling in the corner roared as his skin split, releasing black chitin.

His arms turned into jagged sickles, and thin, clicking wings tore through his back. The surrounding pillars grew a honeycomb pattern that dripped sticky amber resin.

The seamstress stretched like a needle. Her fingers elongated into sharp spokes, and the space around her filled with a sea of shattered porcelain dolls that crunched underfoot, reaching for the fighters with their tiny empty hands. The old man who coughed into his fist crumbled into dust, only to reassemble again as a whirlwind of bone powder and rotten rags.

The ceiling dissolved, revealing a violet nebula where colossal shadows writhed in silence among cold stars. The hall ceased to be a single space. Hellish nightmares merged with the Ring's reality in a single canvas of madness — and the borgs met them face to face.

Ordinary aug-assault troops broke instantly; their minds couldn't withstand the horror. Some fired at their own men, some dropped their weapons and collapsed, folding in on themselves. They were killed immediately.

Hell spilled outward from the building. The sky blackened; the world cracked and collapsed in a torturous fracture.

The borgs faltered.

Their visors flickered, data streams corrupted by artifacts, their movements stuttering for a split second. They were affected too — but the program hardwired into their skulls fought back, clinging to its core directives: "target," "threat," "eliminate." They forced their way through the nightmares and kept advancing.

Their response wasn't panic — it was a precise line of code executed flawlessly. Hydraulics hissed as tripod mounts unfolded from the modules on their backs, stabbing into the concrete floor. Automatic turrets opened like predatory metal flowers.

The Order's answer, hurled straight into Chaos's face.

The world of turrets was sterile and simple. It consisted of vectors, coordinates, and thermal signatures mapped over a prescribed grid. In their processors and crude intelligence, there were no nightmares; their logic couldn't even register a world where living flesh grew out of walls. They didn't care.

They saw anomalously hot, fast-moving objects classified as "threats." Distorted bodies were just clusters of data points to erase. For them, there were no demons, no humans, no dreams. Only targets.

The turrets opened fire.

A stream of molten lead tore worlds apart. The whirlwind of bone dust that the old man had become hit a wall of fire; bullets passed through, but the kinetic force shattered his fragile, twisted form, scattering him into nothing. The tall needle-woman, piercing through an aug, exploded into thousands of shards — just another of her porcelain dolls under a precise burst of fire. The chitin demon-boy with sickle arms and clicking wings was perforated; his shell split open, spilling thick emerald slime.

The turrets were the Pact's perfect weapon — machine logic capable of destroying even the most unimaginable chaos.

Each Chaos fighter's death wasn't a loss. The army didn't die — it fell outward, into their shared home.

Death fed Mark like fuel. He stood in the center of the hurricane of realities and inhaled their agony. The energy of their last furious moments poured into him, his power swelling until it became unbearable. He wasn't a demon cracking open a door to his world. He was something greater. A Destroyer.

His monstrous hand rose and brought down its wrath — not on the borgs, but on the turrets. He didn't fire, and he didn't summon nightmares; he tore reality itself apart.

The first turret shuddered. Mark squeezed space like a fist. Metal shrieked. The mount folded inward, and the whole structure sank into

the concrete, leaving behind a smoking lump of mangled iron. The second burst from within as if its heart had been ripped out: gears, cables, barrels exploded outward, showering the ground with hot fragments. The third jerked, preparing to fire—its ammo box glowed white-hot. A heartbeat later came the blast: a fireball tore it apart along with everyone nearby, scattering a hail of sizzling shrapnel.

The borgs froze. Their programs collided with the impossible: the laws of physics stopped working, and logic broke. They opened fire again. Dozens of barrels spewed a leaden blizzard at the dark figure standing before them.

But the bullets defied physics. The air thickened, vibrated under tension like a string, and space tore open. Not an explosion of fire or the punch of metal, but a collapse of reality itself, a soundless wave of emptiness rushing outward in all directions.

It erased everything in its path: bullets, bodies of borgs and fighters, turret debris—they vanished in the rupture as if they had never existed.

Mark stepped forward. Slowly, through the hurricane of fire striking into the void. He no longer drew strength from death.

He had become pure death.

The borgs in the epicenter died instantly: armor, weapons, synthetic flesh ripped to shreds. Those farther away froze where they stood, their artificial minds burning out, visors dimming one after another with a soft, final click.

And with them, the foreign nightmares faded. The demons born of Chaos's fury didn't even have time to revel in their power. Their private realities folded in on themselves, devoured by the absolute void Mark had unleashed. Total annihilation.

When the last borg crumbled to dust and the last echo of alien madness evaporated, the cacophony of realities went silent. Overlapping worlds vanished like a dream upon waking. The air grew thick with the stench of burnt plastic, blood, and ozone. The fresh snow outside had become a red sea. The silence that followed the storm deafened the survivors.

Out of eighteen Children of Chaos, only three remained alive. They stood amid the slaughter, their demonic shapes gone, their human features returned. Bran, breathing heavily, leaned against a wrecked vehicle, his face

pale and smeared with blood. Nora stood motionless as always, but her shoulders trembled. The third fighter stared at Mark with hollow eyes.

What stood before them was the embodiment of lethal power.

His skin wasn't flesh, but cracked basalt, tempered in primordial fire. Every muscle and tendon was carved with inhuman precision, as if a mad sculptor obsessed with the idea of a perfect predator had crafted him. His head bore a crown of obsidian horns—massive as those of an ancient bull, sharp as shards of darkness. Not a helmet, but part of his skull, one seamless form. On his brow, at the center of the crown, burned a scorched sigil—the seal of power, the Star of Chaos, pulsing with crimson light. The face was a mask of unclouded fury. Coals of rage smoldered in the eye sockets; the predatory grin revealed rows of needlelike teeth made for tearing not only flesh but the world itself. The armor wasn't forged by a smith — it grew from him. Blackened metal, solidified lava, fused with the body and ending in blades as sharp as razors.

And behind him, two wings of darkness and steel unfurled, tearing open the fabric of space. Their feathers were jagged plates, each one sharp enough to cut through metal. They proclaimed his dominion over the void itself. He stood in the midst of the carnage he had created. His order was wrathful Chaos.

They looked at him with primal, sacred terror—with the same awe ancient humans felt at a lightning strike, a volcanic eruption, the arrival of a cruel god. He was no savior in white robes, but a dark messiah, an avatar of their own suffering made flesh.

They saw not a plague dealing meaningless death, but their weapon, born in fire and blood. An answer to every curse they had hurled at the City and the universe. They knew they would follow him through any fire, into the very heart of darkness. He was their general.

At 9:11 a.m., the City logged the Revelation of Abaddon, the Angel of the Abyss, in its protocols.

Intermission 12. Michael

A cell, Michael's body motionless.

A data packet with a red-priority flag — critical failure of operation 34-b1-4a. Not a defeat of the squad, but a collapse of predictability — something the system had never permitted.

Analysis.

Little use. The video streams from the visors of the destroyed squad were just cascades of corrupted data. The system tried to restore the data, but failed — distorted silhouettes warped through the interference, writhing in anomalous distortion. The enemy wasn't jamming the signal; he was breaking the fabric of reality at the point of recording.

Michael closed the corrupted logs and initiated a direct communication channel.

> Status?

A data packet from Gabe.

> Failure. Attempts to obtain real-time anomaly data were unsuccessful. The source generates a field that distorts everything. Our sensors cannot classify it.

> Conclusion: standard units are ineffective. Their operating systems are vulnerable to this type of impact.

> Correct.

The decision was logical and the only possible one.

> Elevating threat level and initiating Protocol Absolute.

A microsecond delay — Gabe's system processing the order.

> Confirmed. Activating the Angels.

Soldiers with absolute firmware, without remnants of personality or free will. Pure executable code in a biological shell. A weapon that does not fail because nothing human remains in it.

> "Status of 'Object 1'?" Michael sent the next query.

> Unchanged. Brain tissue replaced one hundred percent. Integration complete. Higher cognitive function absent, physiology stable. An empty shell, but the field around it remains stable. It neither absorbs nor collapses.

Michael processed that as well. An anomaly within an anomaly. Possibly the key.

> Prepare "Object 1" for transport to Base Alpha. I'm initiating a full invasive examination.

The connection ended. In the sterile emptiness of the cell, nothing changed. Michael felt no disappointment, no worry. He updated the protocols and moved on to the next task in the queue. The war had come one step closer to its logical conclusion.

Intermission 13. Lily

Amy finished her report, and Lily was left alone in her sanctuary at the top of the world.

She turned the wine glass, and the red left a thin trail along the white crystal. She liked that sensation: weight in her hand, a stain on something perfectly clean. That's how the Pact should be. One small crack — and their entire illusion collapses.

Bran's words, relayed by Amy, echoed in her mind. Mark was the key. The one she had waited for so long that she had almost stopped believing. The red dragon who had swept a third of the stars from the sky today.

Now the picture of the battle was clear down to the last detail. The Agency, with its experiments, no longer seemed invincible. Their machines and borgs were nothing but pitiful attempts to lock the world inside a cage where every thought is prewritten and every emotion embedded in code. Once the fabric between the Pact and the Limb grows thin, they will burn.

And they shall not prevail, and there will be no place for them in the heavens.

Hell will come here, and the Pact will fall. She will be reunited with Satan, and their new world will be born — a world of chaos and freedom. She felt it with her whole body — not the wine in the glass, not the lights below — but the breath of what was coming, the thing that would bring fire down to earth.

Now it was up to Eliza. The defeat in the Ring would push the Agency to accelerate its research; Eliza would enter the game and break the City's defenses. Without the central servers, the children would be able to break the encryption and disrupt Contour surveillance.

Then they would remove the safeguards and take the fabrication process out from under supervision. She would be able to print as many bodies as needed. Hide them in the Ring, embed them in the City. Chaos,

once a scattered sect, would become an army, and her vessels would fill with those whom her daughter had gathered in the Limb.

Lily took a sip of wine. Metal and blood. Victory was almost tangible. But with it, the abyss breathed as well. The apocalypse was coming; all that remained was to wait for it. Eliza would play her role. Mark — his. Chaos would win.

But what comes after? A new world or ash? There was no answer. And perhaps that was the very power of Chaos.

Chapter 34. Are You Awake

Eliza walked through the dead park.

This was her place, the point of origin of her existence, the place she returned to when the noise of the Pact and the Mother's whisper became unbearable. The air here was frozen, like ancient dust in a sealed crypt. The trees stretched their gnarled branches toward the eternal clouds; the surface of the canal cutting the park in half lay still like black mercury, reflecting nothing.

Here she had time to think. The souls of the Converted, those she guided, could not enter this place. Their worlds, full of pain and rage, remained beyond an unseen boundary. The park belonged to her alone.

She walked across the bridge spanning the dead water and thought of her mission. Of the Converted. They were the desperate ones, those who had peered behind the cardboard scenery of the Pact and accepted the primordial void. Those who could no longer tolerate the lie and chose to cut themselves free from it. They called, the Dark Mother heard them, and Eliza answered the call.

She was their deliverance. The ritual was simple and unchanging. She took their pain, their final desperate choice, killed them, devoured their tormented shell, and then, in the empty vessel, wove new life out of the Mother's reality. Not death, but rebirth — a world free of lies. She was both reaper and midwife.

But the Girl...

Sometimes, on this very bridge, she appeared. The Girl was a mystery to her, a system error in her frozen dream. Yes, Eliza had killed her. She remembered it as clearly as she remembered her first breath in her new life. The last sin of Officer Liza Dahmer's old life. A stray bullet that ended an innocent life.

But why had she entered the Limbo? Only the Converted entered the Limbo. Those who had chosen, those who had called. The Girl had not called. She had not despaired of the Pact — she lived in it the way children do, without questions. She was not Converted. Her soul should have gone through the Pact's standard protocol, dissolving into the cycle of rebirth, or whatever else had been set aside for the innocent. But she was here.

Eliza stopped at the center of the bridge. She knew what would happen now.

In the motionless air before her, a figure condensed. First, a faint shimmer, then pale outlines, and then—she was there. Small, in a simple white dress with a red stain, blond braids. Her eyes, empty and glassy, looked straight at Eliza. Not with reproach, not with hatred. They simply looked.

Eliza did not move. Every time, she waited for the Girl to speak, to ask something, to accuse, to plead. But she always remained silent. Standing on the bridge in a world she did not belong to, the Girl looked at the one who had ended her life for a long, endless moment. And then she would begin to fade, dissolving into the unmoving air until she disappeared completely, leaving no trace behind.

Eliza remained on the bridge alone, and the silence of the dead park soothed her. This ghost from her past was the only true enigma in her new universe. And she knew that until she solved it, she would never be truly free.

She thought of Mark and pitied him — in the only way she knew how: distantly, like a scientist pities a test subject about to undergo a brutal but necessary experiment. And she herself was the author of that experiment.

It began with the Mother.

One day the Mother called to her. Not with words, but with a pure, disembodied image. She showed her the Pact — an endless, milky fog where lost souls wandered in silence. And among those faceless shades, the Mother found Mark.

He was no shade, but an anomaly — a dense, dark clot of rage and pain that didn't dissolve into the fog, but instead made it thicker. He was trapped in the Pact, but his soul was already living in Hell. And the Mother sent her to that rooftop.

Convert him? No. From the very beginning, the plan had been different. She could not make him a demon, another "child" whose strength depended on his tether to Lilith's reality. Something wild slept inside him, something capable of more. He was meant to become something else. What exactly? Even the Mother did not know, but she felt his potential.

And Eliza began her game. She nudged him, brushing reality with the slightest touch, the way an artist makes the first stroke. Every shift, every crack — not for torment, but for truth.

She wasn't breaking him — she was trying to wake him.

Lilith didn't understand this. With her centuries-old hunger for power and control, she saw in Mark nothing but another tool. Lilith believed that it was enough to shatter his world, drive him into a corner, and he would take their side. As Eliza had, and many before her. She wanted obedience.

But Mark didn't break. He bent, cracked, went mad, but didn't fall. And the plan had to move forward. The Agency was expanding and had moved into open warfare; the borgs were cutting down their people one by one. There was no time left for a delicate game.

So they made a decision — to change the plan. If Mark couldn't be awakened from the outside, then they needed to create conditions in which he would awaken on his own. For that, he needed one final, most terrible loss.

They allowed him to become a traitor. Eliza led him to it, constructing the perfect situation in which his only choice was to become Judas. And she, through his betrayal, entered the one place no demon, no servant of the Mother, could reach.

Into the citadel of the enemy — the Agency's sterile paradise.

Mark was a pawn. Or a queen. None of them knew what he truly was. Not her, not even the Mother. A joker in their deck, and the stakes of this game were far too high.

That night on the rooftop, she saw straight through him — as all demons see humans. One brief shift, and his entire essence, his weaknesses, all his rage buried beneath layers of cynicism lay exposed before her like an open hand. Not a broken cop, but a Destroyer locked in a human body.

And what happened next, in that cold room overlooking the City's glittering lie, had been real. In that moment she wasn't Elizazdra, but darkness

recognizing another darkness. The only moment in her long, endless new life when she wasn't alone.

Then she put the mask back on — the mask of a soulless, calculating bitch who manipulates, provokes, and pushes away. She played easily, move by move, leading Mark toward the betrayal that was destined for him. Every gesture, every word was part of the plan — to break him just enough for him to do what he had to do and hand her over into the Agency's hands.

Her pain and longing for that real night, for that single moment of truth, stayed here, in this dead park. She drowned it in the black, motionless water of the canal, which reflected nothing.

And now she was drowning in it herself.

From far away, almost imperceptible, like static between worlds, another reality seeped through — the Pact. She had learned to perceive it as a second channel of reality, muted, a faint hum of someone else's ordered life.

In that distant hum, she heard words. Clear, filtered, spoken without emotion.

"Transport to Alpha."

They rang like a bell, tearing her out of the still, frozen timelessness of Limbo. It was time to return.

Her body was being moved. The metal sarcophagus shuddered and lifted. Then came a dull clang, a vibration, and a steady, monotonous hum. They were taking her to a new location. She felt acceleration, turns, braking — as a faint, distant echo brushing against her awareness, trapped in darkness.

All their brain manipulations, the IVs, and the darts meant nothing at all. Her body was only a temporary point of contact with the Pact. The anchor was in her park, in the Mother, who anchored herself in that place humans called Hell.

The movement stopped. A hiss of hydraulics, and the lid of her sarcophagus slid aside. For a moment, her skin was struck by cold, sterile air. Hands in stiff gloves lifted her and transferred her onto another, even colder surface. A new sarcophagus. Dozens of soft but unyielding straps fixed her body; electrodes were attached to her temples and wrists. The lid closed, plunging her into darkness.

A sharp sting in her neck — and chemical heat rushed through her veins. Stimulants. The world, once blurred and muffled, turned into a set of sharp, precise signals. She heard the roll of the gurney wheels beneath her, the chirp of medical equipment, the distant, filtered voices speaking in the language of codes and protocols.

Her body, locked inside the perfect geometry of its new metal prison, was pushed along endless corridors. Through a narrow strip of reinforced glass, she glimpsed walls buzzing under the ceiling lamps. Inside, there was no pain, no fear. Only cold, detached observation.

The gurney stopped. Two figures in gray jumpsuits rolled the sarcophagus into a room and locked it in place at the center. Instead of faces, they wore shimmering ripples of virt-masks.

Another hiss, and the lid opened. This time the light blinded her. Harsh and merciless, it struck her empty eye sockets, causing phantom pain. They moved her onto an operating table.

The smell of antiseptics and filtered air. The examination began. She scanned the room: no turrets. Perfect. From a hidden speaker above her head came a flat, emotionless voice.

"Are you awake?" asked the first.

"What is your name?" added the second.

They echoed like a broken algorithm.

"Are you awake?" repeated the first.

"What is your name?" repeated the second.

"Useless," the first concluded. "Scanners confirm no signs of higher brain activity since capture. We can proceed."

The moment he said the last word, the world began to die.

The bright surgical lights dimmed, fading into a dull, deathbed glow. The perfectly white walls yellowed, split with deep cracks from which white, viscous ooze seeped. Chrome instruments on nearby trays bloomed with rust and crumbled into dust. The room aged in seconds; the sterile lab turned into an ancient, rotting crypt.

"What's happening?" shouted the first — his synthesized voice faltered for the first time, broken by the impossible.

Snakes poured from the cracks in the floor. Hundreds, thousands of black, glistening bodies covered the entire floor in seconds, a living, hissing carpet.

With a deafening crack, the sarcophagus split open, its metal walls tearing apart like foil. Eliza rose smoothly. Naked, pale, with dark hollows of burned-out eye sockets, she stood in the middle of that seething sea of snakes, and her asymmetrical face expressed nothing but ruthless triumph.

The borgs tried to run, but the snakes surged upward as a black, hissing wall, coiling around their bodies, slipping under their jumpsuits, sinking into synthetic flesh. Short, gurgling screams were cut off at once. The snakes tore their bodies apart with merciless efficiency.

The slaughter lasted only a few seconds. Eliza stood in the center of the ruined, decayed room, surrounded by bloodied scraps. She was free. She was in the very heart of the enemy base, and she had brought her hell with her.

Eliza walked through the base, and the sterile whiteness of the corridors drowned in her shadow.

They had miscalculated. All their power, all their perfect security systems were aimed outward. Turrets, minefields, and force barriers were built to repel an external threat. In their arrogant logic, none of them had expected that the enemy would come from within.

She walked in her true form, tearing the Pact with every step. The right half of her body had become a nightmare of black, scaled flesh crowned with a curved horn. The left remained the perfection of a human form. From her shadow, from beneath her feet, from the very walls, streams of black, glistening snakes were born and slithered out.

They were her will, her hunger. They slid silently across the white floor, filling the corridors with a living carpet. The guards didn't even have time to raise their weapons. The snakes shot upward, wrapping around bodies, their fangs finding the weak points in armor. The base screamed, dying in agony, incapable of resisting Chaos.

She walked past laboratories, residential blocks, control centers. Bodies were everywhere — torn apart, distorted, frozen in poses of grotesque terror. Hell had devoured their sterile heaven.

Finally, she reached the heart of the base.

It was a massive spherical chamber, and in its center — suspended in an antigravity field — floated a humming sphere of crystalline matrices and fiber optics, pulsing with blue light. The Agency's primary servers. Their God and their brain.

Eliza stepped inside.

A synthesized voice filled the hall. It came from everywhere and nowhere.

Red level. Containment protocol breach. Existential threat detected. Purification protocol activated.

The hall was flooded with red emergency light. A timer lit up on the wall, counting down the last seconds. Confronted with a threat it could not defeat, the system chose the only logical response — self-destruction.

Eliza did not try to run. She stood and watched as their God prepared to sacrifice itself. She had won.

By the time she walked back toward the exit, a low, devouring hum was already rising behind her.

The earth shook. From beneath the snowy plain, a pillar of blinding white fire erupted, turning the day into an inferno for a heartbeat. In her mind — like the strike of a bell — came the message: the end of the old and the beginning of the new world.

Then she walked across the scorched, smoking ground without looking back, a woman clothed with the sun. Behind her, Base Alpha died in flames.

Ahead, in the cold haze of dawn, the City's towers shone.

Chapter 35. Just Be

The silence after the battle was alive and tangible, like breath. It soaked into the howl of the icy wind, the scrape of cooling metal, and the crackle of dying electronics. Mark stood with his back pressed against the frozen wall of the high-rise, feeling the crumbling concrete biting through his soaked jacket. The adrenaline was fading, leaving behind a void in which his own thoughts hummed. He tried to remember the fight. The rage came back to him—molten, like liquid metal in his veins. The world slowing down, stretching—reality suspended in dark amber, with himself at its center.

And then—a fall. Blackness filled with roaring, flashes of light, and the sense that he was no longer a man but something else—something that broke the very foundations of the world.

In the distance, among the snow-covered ruins, Legion fighters moved like soundless shadows. Barely visible in the veil of the blizzard, they methodically collected trophies from corpses: batteries, armor plates, rifles still warm from firing. From time to time someone threw Mark a quick, sidelong glance—not hostile, but filled with superstitious awe. They no longer saw a man, but a wild beast who by some twist of fate fought on their side. Or perhaps not a beast at all, but a god—cruel, unfathomable, born of blood and darkness.

From around the corner, leaning on Rusty and another fighter, Derek appeared. His face had taken on a gray, lifeless shade, and his left arm ended in a torn stump wrapped in a filthy, blood-soaked rag. Blood dripped down his pant leg, leaving dark stains on the snow. He stopped. In his eyes, despite the pain, flickered a shadow of his old mockery.

"Not bad for a former cop," Derek said, exhaling. His voice trembled, but still held that predatory calm that had made him the leader of the Legion.

Rusty led Derek further, toward the improvised med station in the next building. The Legion was gathering everyone who survived, even the heavily wounded. Mark watched them go, feeling the cold of the Ring sinking deeper—not into his body, but into his very core. He wasn't the cop who used to log corpses and hate the City. He had changed, and that terrified him as much as it thrilled him.

Bran and Nora approached without a sound, their shadows gliding across the snow like reflections in dark water. Their faces remained impassive, but their posture carried the coiled readiness of predators waiting for a command.

"We need to move," Bran muttered. "Drones are already inbound. The City won't forgive this."

Mark nodded, and the Legion began to withdraw as well: people carrying the wounded, dissolving into the shadows of the buildings. They knew the City would retaliate. And the Agency was no longer hunting a rogue cop — it was hunting the monster who had ripped their strike group apart single-handedly. The Ring stood frozen in a tense, breathless pause.

On the battlefield, not only borgs lay scattered. Among the bodies were people: augs, assault troops—just like he once was, like Diana. They had memories, habits, families, even if sewn together with code. What was it they said in Mari's books, zos and kia? Even if only a fraction of one percent of a human being remained, it was still a person. And he had killed them.

Their blood still steamed in the snow, and the thought kept circling back to him. The City—and any average person—would call him evil. But the City calls evil any will except its own. So what is evil, really? What is evil at all? War is always born from each side believing it is right. Sides and justifications change, but the essence stays the same: everyone calls the other a monster. And by that logic, he was neither worse nor better than anyone else.

The City could not be good—he had understood that long ago. But why then was the City evil? Not because it controlled or maintained order, but because it stripped people of choice. It took the soul and reforged it into a synthetic shell. It broke will and called it happiness. That's why he went against BioTech—they wanted to break him the way they broke the Ring and replace his will with an algorithm.

So goodness wasn't in the law or in majority consensus, not in a Committee protocol or in commandments. Goodness was when your will remained yours. When you could say "no" even when the world expected "yes." When you refused to bend to a dogma, refused to dissolve into a convenient lie.

True evil is the destruction of will. Everything else is just a way to preserve that will.

When he returned to the little bookshop, the pre-dawn gloom had already given way to falling snow. The smells wrapped around him like a memory of another life. A pocket universe in the chaos of the Ring: shelves overloaded with books, the soft glow of a lamp, the worn-out couch he had sat on so many times. Mari stood behind the counter, her fragile figure seeming like part of this place, as though she were cut from the same paper as the dusty pages. Without asking a thing, she set a cup of tea in front of him, her movements smooth, almost ritualistic. Steam rose, dissolving in the half-light, and Mark felt the tension of the battle finally release its grip.

He sank into the couch, looking out the window, where snowflakes swirled in the dim light. Today's victory wasn't the end. It was only the opening note of his personal overture to the real war.

He looked at Mari. Her calm, her quiet certainty hid answers to every question he was afraid to ask. But he couldn't stay silent anymore. He had to understand.

"Who are they?" he asked, surprised by how strange and hollow his own voice sounded. "The 'Children of Chaos,' Eliza... demons? What the hell are they?"

Her visor held a tiny ghost of his reflection. She watched him, and her words held no pity, no mockery—only cold, inhuman clarity.

"Remember what I told you about the shared dream?" she began. "The one that binds all of us. One man, a long time ago, in the New York subway, called it the Pact. I liked the name. Demons are the ones who wake up inside that dream. They refused its rules, its lies and morality. But they still have an anchor in the Pact—their body."

She paused. Mark felt her voice seep into him like the cold of the Ring.

"Archdemons like Lilith are stronger than the others," Mari continued. "They find the 'awakened' and destroy their body, cutting it off from the

Pact. Then they give a new anchor—in Limbo, in their own reality: through rituals, sigils, the eating of flesh. Demons can return to the Pact, but they need a vessel, a body. They used people for that — the weak in spirit, the mentally ill. They called it possession: someone else stepping into a human. Now a bioprinted body is enough. But archdemons are stronger—their anchor isn't in Limbo, but in Hell itself, and Hell holds on through Satan."

Mari shattered his understanding of reality, yet instead of fear, Mark felt only calm, almost joyful clarity. In that strange stillness he found only one question.

"So Eliza really was killing people?"

"She took their souls into Limbo so she could return them to the Pact later. Eliza is a Reaper. She's building an army. The demons you saw today—they're her children."

"And me?" he asked, and his voice trembled. "What about me?"

Mari's visor remained unreadable.

"You're not a demon, Mark," she said. "I killed you."

He felt no pain, no despair. The fact slid neatly into the cold structure of his new world. He nodded, accepting her words.

"I killed you in that burning car," she went on, and there was... pity in her voice? "If I hadn't, you would've died for real. Your soul, your 'self'—call it what you want—would have dissolved in the rupture. No one knows what's beyond the Pact or Hell. I didn't let you disappear."

His human side should have screamed, clinging to the Pact and its illusions. But he stayed silent. Inside, only clarity remained—he accepted himself, Eliza, and what Mari had revealed.

"Then who are you?" he asked, more quietly than he'd intended. "If you're not with Lily, not a demon... then what?"

Mari smiled. Not warmly and not sadly—she smiled the way people do when they've been waiting for a question and have always known it would come.

"I am your point of balance, Mark," she said. "Your anchor in this world. Without me, you would've dissolved into the void like millions of others."

There was a confession in her words—and it came closer to love than anything he had ever seen in the Pact: its songs, its films, its sterilized promises of happiness. He had no name for it.

"You... are Death?" he asked, surprised at how calm those words sounded.

Mari laughed, and in that laughter was an inhuman lightness—as if she had heard this question a thousand times.

"People like to cover the complicated with simple names," she said. "No, Mark. I'm not an ending. I'm a transition. In old texts—ones my clients adore—they call me Mara. But that name is too... demonic. I prefer Mari."

She fell silent. Her calm was a mirror reflecting his own new, monstrous face—the face of a Destroyer carved from fire and blood. Mark searched her for lies or madness, but all he saw was the truth—merciless as the stars reflected in her visor.

"Demons don't like you," he said, recalling Amy's words at the bar. Not a question, but a conclusion assembled from fragments of stories and memories.

"Correct." Her smile widened. "No one likes me, Mark. They fear me. Those who cling to the Pact, and those who dream of breaking it. To the Pact, I'm a glitch, a crack in their system. To demons, I'm a reminder that their Hell isn't the only reality."

He watched her, trying to understand whether her words held more bitterness or challenge.

"Then why are you with me?" he asked. The one question that burned like a shard of molten metal inside his mind.

Mari turned away, staring at the falling snow outside the window. Her silhouette in the dark glass looked fragile, almost ghostlike, but inside it, an unbreakable force glowed.

"I'm not helping you, Mark," she said, her voice quiet, yet it slipped under the skin like a needle. "I exist through you. The angels' victory, their order, would mean the end. No doors, no passages. An eternal crystal dome where nothing ever changes. There's no place for me in such a world."

She lifted her eyes, and the reflection of light slashed across his face like a blade.

"That's why Chaos is closer to me now. Not because I want its triumph. Chaos breaks walls—therefore, it opens thresholds. I'm not with Lilith and not with the Agency. I stand for the transition itself. For the cycle not to turn to stone. So there will always be a door — from one world to another."

Not an ally, but the law of movement itself, the crack in the monolith of existence. Mark rose from the couch and stepped closer. In the window's reflection, both of them appeared: her thin, fragile figure and his warped shape; the horns on his head looked like a crown of obsidian.

He stopped behind her.

"Or because I don't fear you?" he whispered.

He reached toward her face, toward the visor she never removed. His fingers—black, clawed—trembled not from fear, but from the anticipation of something inevitable and final.

"You shouldn't see me," Mari whispered, not turning. For the first time, there was fear in her voice — not loud, but ancient, like the emptiness between worlds.

But Mark didn't stop. His fingers touched the visor, the cold of the metal pulsing through his skin. He paused for a moment, testing—would she allow it? Somewhere in the room, an old clock ticked.

He felt the tension building, the world holding its breath around this single point. Carefully, as if afraid to break a fragile balance, he removed the visor.

Mari turned her head, and her face opened to him.

The skin around her eye sockets was gray, corpse-like, revealing what shouldn't exist beneath. In the voids where her eyes had once been, a mass of pale, writhing maggots churned. They intertwined, moved, breathed like a single organism—and looked at him, not with eyes, but with the blind, chaotic life of their own being. Death birthing life and devouring itself.

Mark didn't recoil. He saw not decay, but truth—bare, stripped of the Pact's illusions. An essence that hid behind no facade of symmetry or bright light. A reflection of his own nature, born of fire and blood, of chaos and destruction.

He leaned in and kissed her. His lips touched her cold skin, her rotting tongue, and he felt movement — as if the flesh itself were breathing beneath his lips.

It wasn't love in the sense the Pact romanticized it — nothing like the kind that only promised reproduction. It was recognition, the resonance of two fractures in the fabric of the dream, two beings who happened to stand on the same side of the mirror. He, the Destroyer, saw in her not deformity but truth. She, looking at him—a monster—saw not a mistake, but purpose.

Their kiss held no passion, only rhythm—a shared cadence where two nightmares intertwined into one. Not merging, but a convergence of realities, a moment in which two truths recognized each other.

He didn't draw back. The kiss sank deeper, the flesh beneath his lips crumbling like wet soil, the maggots shifting and intertwining as if breathing back at him. He felt her cold, collapsing body—and didn't pull away. He stepped into the rift she opened, and she received him with no warmth, no desire, only a clarity more terrifying than love.

The cold of her flesh wrapped around him like wet, icy clay. Her skin tore beneath his fingers, gray scraps sliding away to reveal the whitish tissue below, alive and dead at once. Maggots fell onto his hands and moved through his hair — it was her breath, her presence.

The moment was a rhythm — two fractures in the fabric of the dream beating in unison. Every pulse of that rhythm was answered with a crunch, a rustle, the breathing of decay. He smelled the rot, heard the maggots shift beneath her skin, and all of it was more honest than any touch the Pact had ever promised.

Beauty wasn't in the lines of her body. Beauty lived in decay, in what did not pretend to be alive. In the cold of gray skin, in the empty sockets crawling with sightless beings.

Outside, snow fell and then hung, frozen in midair, and in that stillness Mark no longer feared the Pact or the City. Now he knew: his point of balance would not vanish. She was eternal.

And in that knowledge lay freedom. Not the kind the Pact promised—a sterile paradise without fractures. Not the kind demons offered—a chaotic hell devouring itself. This was freedom to be himself. The freedom of the Destroyer, born of fire and bound to the Transition that stands at every threshold.

He looked into her empty sockets, where the pale mass writhed, and smiled into the face of his own death. Not a human smile—a beast's grin, finding its essence.

"What now?" he asked.

Mari answered with a smile, and for the first time, there was a spark in it—something almost like warmth.

"Now, Mark," she said. "You will destroy everything. Or create something new. That depends only on you."

Beauty has always been a lie. The Pact showed towers bathed in even light—the façade of a sterile paradise. Symmetry, order, harmony—a decoration meant to suggest meaning. A mask hiding the emptiness of the collective dream.

But true beauty was not born in lines and proportions, not in the golden ratio or the symmetry of storefronts. It lived where truth was exposed and falsehood vanished. In the smell of blood on snow—sharp as a slap to the face. In the twisted grin where teeth were the memory of pain. In the maggots shifting in empty sockets, because death doesn't pretend it isn't there. In the dirt under fingernails, the scars on the face, the pus that does not feel shame for its nature. In what does not hide and does not ask for approval.

True beauty is what is not afraid to be itself. What stands naked before the world—without filters or corrections, without algorithms shaping it to standards. It whispers: "I exist, and that is enough." It remains truth, even when others call it ugliness. When the crowd turns away, that truth does not bend—it cuts, like a shard of glass in the palm. It is the thing that cracks reality and forces you to look. In that fracture where the Pact breaks and Chaos pushes through—in that gap between worlds, another kind of vision is born. It grips you like a magnet, making you stare into the abyss, because in it lies the reflection of your own essence, neither prettified nor broken.

There is freedom in this: not obeying someone else's instructions, not bowing to imposed ideals. Not following protocols where beauty is measured in numbers, where a scar is erased by laser, and asymmetry is a crime against harmony. Freedom is in rejecting that lie, in the right to smash the display window and see the emptiness behind it. In the right to call a monster beautiful, and an idol—an empty shell: a demon with horns—the pin-

nacle of evolution; a borg with a perfect smile — just a puppet without a soul. In the right to choose your own truth, even if that truth is larvae in eye sockets and blood on snow.

In a world where the City had built its towers out of lies, true beauty was an act of rebellion: it tore down walls, exposing the nerves of reality, making you feel the pulse beneath the skin—uneven, painful, but alive. And in that pulse, in that stripped-down truth, the fracture became a doorway into his new "self."

Chapter 36. End of the Cycle

In the evening, he went to the Abyss.

Outside, soft, lazy snow was falling, filling the streets with emptiness, but inside the bar it was hot and cramped with people. The air—usually thick with the smell of old wood and tobacco—today carried sweat and barely hidden tension.

The Abyss hummed like never before. At every table, in every alcove, people were sitting, and they weren't the usual regulars. His table stood empty—Bran had taken care of that. Mark slipped into his corner and began studying the visitors.

There, by the counter, two men with raven tattoos on their necks—Pops' people. At a distant table, three in identical leather jackets with skulls—Eastside. All the predators of the Ring had gathered here, on the victor's turf.

They weren't celebrating; they'd come to negotiate. They sensed who was in charge now. The negotiations, apparently, were already over—and rather successful.

Derek sat at a table in the center of the hall. On his left arm was a bioprosthesis, not yet calibrated. He held himself as if it weren't an injury, but a new mark of power. Beside him, Rusty and Slim were receiving guests. The Legion was no longer one of many gangs. Today, they were the government of the Ring.

Mark silently drank his whiskey and watched. In the corner above the bar, on an old, flickering screen, the City's news broadcast began. The bar's chatter died down; everyone watched it as if waiting for the result of a sports match. They waited—for a declaration of war, a total sweep, for the City's response to their audacity.

But it didn't come.

The synth-anchor, with a polite smile, reported yet another BioTech success in life-extension research, then moved on to the weather. And at the very end, in passing: "The City Committee reports that the renovation program of the Old City is postponed indefinitely due to the need for additional infrastructure planning."

And that was it. Not a word about the battle, the hundreds dead, or the Agency's losses. In their reality, no battle had happened at all—just a small, boring administrative delay.

A quiet, angry murmur passed through the bar. It was scarier than a declaration of war. The City had no intention of destroying them—it pretended they did not exist. That their victory, their blood, their corpses—were trivial, unworthy of mention.

The City wasn't fighting an enemy. It was fighting reality itself, and in that war, machine guns were unnecessary.

Derek rose; his face revealed nothing. He issued short, sharp orders. The Legion's people quietly dispersed, and representatives of other gangs stood up as well, whispering to one another as they left into the night. The curtain fell. The war slipped into the shadows.

Mark remained in his corner, watching the bar empty out.

Bran collected dirty glasses. When he turned, his figure blurred, like a corrupted file, and through the human face, another visage surfaced—a lipless maw and bony spikes instead of teeth. The vision vanished, and the same big, heavy man wandered between the tables again.

The figure of Nora, silently wiping a table, lost its clarity, dissolving into a trembling swarm of dark, iridescent insects, which then immediately gathered back into human form.

Today he had seen others too. Not many, but they were there. A complex pattern of glowing metallic veins flickered on the skin of one of Derek's fighters. The eyes of the old man sitting in the corner shone with pure white light.

These were the demons. The ones who had awakened.

Their true visages, their real nature, pressed through the thin membrane of the Pact like a watermark on a pre-war hundred. And Mark, looking at them, saw nothing horrifying.

On the contrary—there was something real in them.

Bran, having cleared away the last glasses, nodded to Mark and went into the back room. Only Derek remained in the Abyss, sitting at his table in the center of the hall, watching the screen above the bar.

Finally, he stood up and walked over to Mark's table. He sat down opposite him, set a bottle and two clean glasses on the table. His left hand, with its rough prosthetic, moved uncertainly.

"Nice way you played me, cop," he said without anger. "And I fell for it like some green rookie."

He took a sip.

"What was that whole masquerade for?" he went on, looking straight into Mark's eyes. "You knew. And you're just like them."

Mark stayed silent, watching the dim lamp-light fracture in the amber liquid of his glass.

"It's more complicated," he said at last.

"Oh, much more complicated," Derek snorted.

He seemed to want to ask something else — what Mark was, or what had happened during the fight — but didn't dare. He stared into the bottom of his glass, at the sparkling liquid that trembled faintly in his fingers.

At last, he lifted his gaze, and in the eyes of the veteran and gang leader there was no fear — only exhaustion, as old as the war itself.

"We're all done, aren't we?" Derek asked in a low voice. He wasn't afraid — he genuinely wanted to know. "Like in those books I buy from your friend. Apocalypse. Kali Yuga. End of the cycle. That's how it ends, right?"

Mark said nothing. He looked at this strong, tired man searching for answers in ancient myths, and felt something like compassion. Derek was preparing for the end of the world without realizing it had already come. That they all lived on its ruins. The whole world was one endless, uninterrupted end of the world.

"Yes," Mark said at last. "Everything will change."

But what would change — even he didn't know. He looked at Derek, at his face scarred with fresh cuts, and asked the question he had wanted to ask him since their very first meeting in the café.

"Why are you afraid of Mari?"

Derek sat motionless, and only his clenched jaw betrayed the tension.

"I don't know, cop. Honestly. I don't know how it is for you people in the City, or for... someone like you. But ordinary people are afraid of her."

He took a sip.

"They don't tell stories about her, like they do about Pops or me. They don't say she killed someone or robbed someone. They don't say anything at all. She just... is. She's always been here, as long as I can remember. Selling her dusty books. And all the gang leaders, even the craziest ones, avoid her shop. No one knows why. It's just... how it has to be. Like an old rule no one ever wrote down but everyone knows. Don't touch her. Don't ask her questions. Don't look her in the eyes."

He fell silent, looking into his glass, then added in almost a whisper:

"They say that if she ever takes off that visor of hers, you'll die. I haven't checked, and I'm not going to. Like I told you — it's better not to touch your kind at all."

Derek left, abandoning his unfinished whiskey and the silence of the empty bar. Bran quietly cleared the glasses away, and that gesture said more than any words.

Mark returned to the bookshop, and outside the window snow was falling again in thick, lazy flakes. Mari wasn't asleep. She sat in her chair, book set aside, and looked at him through the visor as if she knew exactly when he would return.

He said nothing, just walked over to the couch, shrugged off his cloak, and sat down. He was exhausted. Not physically — his new body didn't know fatigue — but mentally. The conversation with Derek, the fight, Mari's revelations — all of it had worn him out.

Mari stood up, brewed tea, and set a cup before him. She didn't ask any questions. The eternal hum of anxiety inside his head — as familiar as a heartbeat — finally went silent. He was no longer a hunter or prey. He simply was.

That night he slept well. Without dreams or ghosts. And the morning turned out to be unusual: it was sunny.

Through the dense shroud of clouds that always hung over the Ring, sunlight was breaking through. It didn't get warmer, but even so, for the Ring it was a rare joy. The overcast sky glowed as if it were about to burst

open, and in that unfamiliar light the snowy rooftops and the rusty frames of abandoned cars looked beautiful, like a glossy photograph.

Mark stood at the window and waited. He didn't know exactly what. A reaction from the City. A new strike. The end.

Mari was asleep. He heard her steady, peaceful breathing. She was his anchor in all this madness, but he knew that soon even that anchor would tear loose.

He was waiting for some kind of sign. The final signal before everything began. And he knew the signal would come. In a broken world, he had learned to sense such things the way an animal senses an approaching earthquake.

And the sign arrived.

It wasn't a falling star or the four horsemen of the Apocalypse.

At first, far to the east, the sky flashed with a blinding white light — soundless.

Then came the roar. Low, barely audible, it didn't come from the street but was resonated deep in his bones, inside his skull. A roar that made the windowpanes vibrate and the cups on the table rattle.

Twenty seconds later came the crash. Heavy, muffled, rolling.

An explosion.

Mark stood at the window, staring at the sky where the white flash had died. The echo had long since faded, dissolving into the morning air, yet it was still ringing in his ears. He turned away from the window.

The day passed in waiting. The timid morning light quickly surrendered, and the sky over the Ring closed again with its usual leaden shroud. Mark mechanically ate something hot in a nearby diner, tasting nothing. Returning to the shop, he lay for a long time on the old couch, watching Mari sleep under the blanket. Her steady breathing was the only orderly rhythm in his chaos.

When dusk finally drowned the Ring, he rose. Something had to be done — but what, he didn't know. So he went to the bar.

By late evening, the Abyss was empty. The anxious hum that had filled the bar after the news had ebbed, leaving behind a few grim fighters of the Legion silently nursing their beer, and a thick, smoky stillness. On the screen above the bar, figures in some synth show writhed in silence: perfect

faces, sterile emotions, drama polished down to a safe, predictable formula. The City was trying to pretend nothing had happened.

The tension of that heavy, endless day was starting to ease in him. The City had ignored them. It had gone quiet, pulled back, postponed the Renovation. The battle was won. Watching the fake passions on the screen, he almost believed everything truly had calmed down.

He finished his whiskey, feeling the false, chemical warmth spread through his veins, dulling the anxiety. Time to go home. He stood up — and the cuff in his pocket chirped.

A sound — sharp, long-forgotten. He took it out, and a holo unfolded over the table. Three words.

Missed you.

At first, his thoughts stalled; then they spun into a whirlwind. A trap. An Agency game. A psychological trick from Lily. His own mind. Anything. But the message was neither a command nor a threat. He stared at it, and a single name pulsed in his head.

Chapter 37. Kill Me

A stranger's cuff — metal and plastic — Amy pressed into his hand right here in the bar. Mark clenched it so hard the metal creaked. It could have been Lily — her calculated move meant to drive a wedge between him and Mari. Or Amy — all false smiles and venomous hints. Another manipulation, another attempt to drag him into their bloody game.

But beyond logic and suspicion, something else broke through — not knowledge born of reason, but of that dark essence now living in his body. It recognized, unmistakably, her pain and longing in the message. A recognition he had felt for the first time that night on the roof, in the rain, when her eyes — one light, one dark — pierced straight to his core.

It was Eliza.

He lunged to his feet, knocking the chair over. Derek shouted something after him, but the words stayed behind the door. And then he was running. The snow-covered streets of the Ring blurred into a white tunnel. He ran toward her home — the place where everything had begun — pushed forward by desperate hope.

Eliza stood beneath the dim glow of a single streetlamp; her hair was wet with melting snow. Not a captain in a flawless uniform, not a demon. Just a woman — fragile, lonely, waiting for him under the falling snow. Her face, with its distorted features, looked strange, almost broken. He felt her call — not with his ears but somewhere deep inside.

"Here you are, Mark," she said.

She turned and walked toward the entrance, her steps swallowed by the snow. Mark followed — because nothing else mattered.

The apartment remained the same yet breathed differently. The old dresser, the worn-out chair, the window overlooking the City — none of it felt foreign anymore. Every object recognized him, and the room itself

seemed to exhale in relief, taking him back into its womb. Eliza stopped in the middle of the room and turned.

Mark looked at her — and his eyes tore through the veil of the Pact, revealing the essence beneath. He saw an endless, cosmic loneliness — the loneliness of a being standing between worlds, belonging to none. He felt her pain — not as a memory, but as a living, bleeding wound that had become her prison. In front of him stood Liza Dahmer, kneeling in a puddle, in the rain, beside the small body of a girl with pigtails whose life had ended because of her mistake. This scene, this guilt replaying endlessly in her soul, had become her Hell.

He saw the bridge. Not steel and concrete, but a symbol — a black channel frozen like mercury beneath a starless, grim sky. At the edge — her, a gun at her temple, ready to step into oblivion. He lived through her despair, her death, and her agonizing rebirth into the thing that now stood before him. He saw not her life story but her very nature — and lived it as if it were his own pain.

His fingers, crooked and monstrous, touched her cheek. She didn't recoil — she just closed her eyes., and a tear slid down her face, pure as an echo of a forgotten memory. In that moment there was no Pact, no Ring, no City. Only them — two ruptures in the fabric of reality.

Not a kiss but a merging of abysses, a collision of dark stars in the void. His darkness recognized hers; his pain answered her pain. Their closeness was neither tenderness nor passion, but something ancient, primal — recognition in which two hurricanes found a common center. In the abandoned apartment, under the howl of the wind and the glow of distant towers, they were not human but gods — the Destroyer and the Reaper, whose realities had collapsed into one.

A ritual of union, where they shaped their bodies — his black armor, her scaled flesh — into a pure extension of their will. Every movement, every touch, shattered the last chains binding them to the world of lies. They destroyed the boundaries between them, burned them in a rhythm where pain and fury became a shared song. In this room, in the heart of the dying Ring, they were at home for the first time.

Their bodies, torn out of the Pact, were now nothing more than empty shells, foreign and dead. Outside, the snow covered the dying world. Eliza

looked at it, and in her eyes he finally found his own reflection — not a man, but the Destroyer, whose crown shone in half-light.

She looked into him, and his memory opened before her like a book. Mari's shop, smelling of dust and herbs. The fragile figure in the chair. The visor, shimmering like stars in the Limb. Their strange conversations, the warmth of tea, her calm — salvation and a trap. The Legion turning into a legion of demons. He himself — the Destroyer, crushing turrets, reality exploding as it erased his enemies into dust. His rage, his triumph, his pain. Mari's eyes and the connection that held them. She knew everything.

In her knowing, there was no jealousy or hatred. Those feelings belonged to the Pact, to people clinging to illusions of possession and loss. They were beyond it now; the Pact had released them, and its laws no longer held power.

They lay side by side, two beings stripped to their core, and between them no secrets remained.

Silence broke with her voice — quiet, almost soundless, tinged with sadness.

"So you are bound to her," she said.

She saw Mari through his eyes: warmth, hidden strength, that mysterious power that held him. Mark could not lie.

"I don't know," he answered. "I think so."

Mari wasn't a memory or the woman who had pulled him from the void. She was an anchor, a thread stretched from the past, from the world of the Pact — hated, yet still holding him. As long as that bond existed, he could not become part of Eliza's hell.

Her asymmetric face froze in the half-light like something cast from metal — a mirror where rupture and darkness mingled. There was only one way out — monstrous, but simple.

"Then do it," he said. His voice was calm, like the water of the Fort-Point Canal. "Kill me, Eliza."

A shadow crossed her eyes — not fear, but understanding.

"Kill me," he repeated. Cold logic of a being that had stepped beyond human morality. "The same way you do with the others. Consume me. Reassemble me. Give me an anchor point in you. Erase what belongs to them."

He extended his black, clawed hand and touched her cheek, feeling the coldness of her skin and the heat of what she carried inside. Eliza looked at him, and there was no horror in her eyes. She understood the sacrifice he was asking her for. Not death, but union — the final step to become one.

Her hand rose, and a knife coiled out of the darkness: a black bone handle, a matte blade that reflected no light. Her movements were smooth, ritual, like those of a priestess of an ancient rite. She leaned in, raised the blade. Not hatred — mercy. A love not human, but the kind born in Hell, where two ruptures fall into one abyss.

The blade slid under his ribs easily, almost without pain, finding his heart with surgical precision. Cold turned into the burning warmth of blood, and the world collapsed into a point. Her face flashed before him, distorted by snowy light, leaning over him, and the eyes in which he had found a home.

His shell — the flesh bound to Mari — was disintegrating. Eliza was drawing in his pain, his fury, and his memories, rebuilding him within her reality.

The bond vanished, but its shape remained imprinted forever in his new essence.

He thought he was severing the anchor. He didn't understand the truth: that this severing was itself another manifestation of Mari. For what is the rupture of an anchor, if not simply another Rupture?

Instead of the stale apartment, he was lying on a cold, rough surface, like wet gravel. Each breath was thick, with a taste of smoke and dampness, as in an abandoned bunker where he had once hidden from bombs. Above him stretched a bleak sky, smothered by clouds.

The park was a wasteland of lost hopes. The skeletons of trees — black, withered — reached upward in useless pleading. Their bark peeled away in layers, and beneath it, brown, rotting wood seeped out, exhaling ash and oblivion. There was no life here — only the petrified memory of something gone forever, frozen in the very air.

Mark felt Eliza in every breath of the motionless air, in the cold tightening around his chest, in the silence pressing down like a stone vault, in the longing that pulled him forward like a nerve torn from a body and still connected to it. Her essence — pain, loneliness, eternal exile — lived

everywhere: in the shadows between the trees, in the crumbling bark, in the mute places where steps disappeared.

This longing was different, inhuman. Not sentimental, not the kind expressed with tears or words. It was inevitable, like the death of a star.

Before him lay a wide bridge, lined with streetlamps and rusted railings. Its concrete, wet from the fog, stretched into the distance and dissolved into a pale shroud where all boundaries vanished.

Below it was a canal where darkness flowed, swallowing reflections. Not just a river, but a boundary, an Acheron. A line beyond which the living cease to live. He stepped onto the concrete. With each step, the past crumbled to ash — memories of the Pact, of the Ring, of Mari. It trailed behind him, but then tore loose and fell, dissolving in the water.

And he kept walking, sinking into the wet, heavy air. Stopping was impossible — something unknown was pulling him forward, not thought or desire, but a primordial call, stubborn and unavoidable.

Another step, and the concrete of the bridge beneath his foot turned soft, like wet earth. The air thickened, smelled of damp ash, and the shroud of fog ahead condensed, taking on the outlines of dark rooftops. Before him lay Carver Falls, a phantom carved out of darkness. The street stretched into the gloom, the asphalt cracking and crumbling like the skin of a dying thing, and the void gaped in the fissures.

The storefronts of the few shops — murky, like fogged glass, with no light or people behind them, only a viscous dusk. The main square extended farther, seeming endless. The wind drove dry leaves, lifting them into whirlwinds like the shadows of long-departed souls.

The town didn't speak to him with voices. Its speech seeped from the silence of walls, trickled down in warm drops of rain, howled in empty windows. The whisper was faceless, but Mark recognized it — as his own essence.

Carver Falls was not a place but a threshold. A cave without walls, where the cracks in the asphalt became gates, and the depths below breathed sorrow. From there, from the depths, came the echo of guilt and pain frozen into this land.

He was guided by a longing that permeated every corner of this ghost town. It pushed him forward, toward the place where something he did not yet know would be revealed.

The town ended, and before him rose a dark wall of forest — dense, snow-laden, where the trees stood motionless, guarding a passage into the unknown. The path vanished, and Mark trudged through snowdrifts up to his waist; branches clutched at his cloak with desperate insistence, like the fingers of suicides clawing for life in a final grasp. Frost pierced his body deeper than any blade. Skin born of fire and fury cracked with a dry snap, like obsidian cracking under water's icy breath. The cracks deepened, and from them oozed thick, black ichor — his blood. Beneath the armor, exposed flesh emerged — raw and crimson — and every step echoed with agony, as if his very body were being flayed without mercy. The wind howled, the snow blinded his eyes, and in this pain a power awakened — inhuman, calling from the darkness.

The forest did not end. The darkness contracted and expanded, revealing bottomless pits under the snow. Mark fell into them, choking on the air, climbed out again, and scraps trailed behind his every movement — shreds of black flesh freezing into the icy crust. It was his past, falling away from him in pieces of rot. Pain did not break him — it burned away everything unnecessary like acid.

The drifts seized him, tore him sideways, but in every fall, in every torn shroud, he found purification. Flesh crumbled to dust, and with it the entire world crumbled away.

When his strength ran out and his body was stripped down to ragged wounds, the forest parted. Before him spread a plain — white, smooth, endless. Above it hung a coal-black sky, empty, without a single star. There was no horizon: beyond lay only the nothingness into which reality itself disappeared.

A river cut across the plain. Thick as oil, it knew no frost and devoured light.

On its bank stood a house. Old, dead, its walls whitened by frost, cracking like ancient bones. The roof sagged under the weight of unbearable sorrow. The house was silent — foreign, lonely, like death itself.

And there, at the very edge of the water, He stood.

Chapter 38. House of Blood and Ice

He stood motionless, like a statue carved by the winds of oblivion. His silhouette — tall, angular — merged with the shadow of the house, as if he had grown out of its rotting roots.

Mark walked toward Him.

The shore — a white, snow-covered desert, scorched by frost. The blood of the river lay still, reflecting emptiness. The world was frozen, and only his breath reminded him that he still existed on the edge of reality. With each step toward the house, he felt more and more clearly that this was where everything began and ended.

The figure by the water turned and headed toward the house. Mark followed. The snow made no sound — he walked noiselessly, gliding over it like a shadow. His soles sank softly, leaving prints; the air chilled his skin. The closer he came to the house, the stronger the pressure grew — not a thought, but a faint push from within, as if the house itself were calling him.

The man disappeared into the doorway, and Mark stopped at the porch. Here the air smelled of damp earth and old wood; a thick, heavy scent, almost tangible on the tongue. He touched the doorframe with his palm — the wood was cold and slightly wet — and pushed the door.

It yielded with a long, groaning creak. Beyond the threshold, silence met him — not emptiness, but a mass, thick and heavy, filling his ears, his lungs, his joints. Rotting boards and the sickly sweetness of mold. Thin rays, filtering through the cracks in the boarded-up windows, clung to shreds of wallpaper, to the bare ribs of broken furniture, to the dust suspended in the room's dense air. The floor beneath him bent slightly, but didn't creak; somewhere within the wall, wood crackled — the only living sound in this kingdom of stillness.

He stepped forward, and the house held its breath. The dust in the air grew heavier, glinted — and instead of gray motes it turned into golden dust shimmering in the half-light. Wet stains on the walls darkened for a moment and pulled together into even rectangles of paneling; cracks sealed like sutures; gaps that breathed frost tightened shut. The same quiet crackle that had just come from the rotten board answered differently — the dry pop of logs in a hearth. The smell of mold yielded to a thick warmth: wormwood, lavender, wine-sweetness, heated brick.

The darkness didn't vanish at once — it peeled away like old paint: layer after layer receding, revealing the second skin of the house. The walls straightened and brightened, the glass in the windows turned clear; somewhere far off, glasses chimed, and laughter — like a whisper carried on a breeze — gained strength, becoming the hum of distant music. The stonework of the fireplace, moments ago buried in ash, burst into flame — fire leapt upward in a living, roaring column, reflections racing across gilded cornices and the polished marble of the floor. The house that had greeted him with decay unfolded and became a hall: warm, richly adorned, with soft light and fire-shadows swaying on the walls.

He sat by the fire — tall, beast-like. On His skin, black script coiled; lines shifted like snakes and vanished in the folds of muscle. The head of a goat with long, backward-curling horns; in the eyes — neither flame nor darkness, but the icy primal void, older than light. Something inside Mark began to change — slowly gathering into a new form.

Mark's skin tightened and hardened into basalt with thin fissures; muscles and sinews emerged sharp and clean. On his forehead, beneath the skin, a crimson star of chaos flared. Across his shoulders and forearms settled armor fused with flesh, like frozen lava etched with the scars of time. Behind him, two wings — dark, metallic — spread; with every movement their plates rang, and the fire of the hearth slid along their edges.

The hall drifted in and out of reflections; music faded and returned. The old, rotten house remained only as a memory and the smell of ash.

"Sit," said Satan, pointing a clawed hand at the chair by the fire.

The chair slid out on its own, stirring a memory of another meeting. Mark sat, feeling the warmth of the fire seep through the armor. On the low table, wine refracted the flames into a thin, blood-red line.

"Better," He said quietly, and the gold on the walls responded, darkening by half a tone. "I don't like speaking to those who remain standing."

His fingers no longer trembled; the skin had tightened, strength settling in his muscles in an even, heavy layer.

"You walked for a long time," said Satan. "Longer than you should have."

He spoke neither threateningly nor soothingly — as if reciting cold data. In the distance, the servant-voices laughed and dissolved into whispers; the music vibrated in the breath of the halls.

"Do you know where you are?" He asked.

"I do," Mark answered; his new voice sounded even and firm. "At the boundary."

In Satan's empty eyes, recognition flickered for an instant.

"Correct. At the boundary. But not of worlds — at the boundary of choice."

He rose. The figure — beastlike, monstrous — did not seem threatening.

"You look at Me and think of old books — fallen angels, biblical tales. Forget them. That's part of the Pact, their firmware that forces labels onto everything."

He stood and walked to the hearth. His hands moved smoothly, almost hypnotically; he wasn't just touching objects — he was conversing with the space itself. He paced the room in measured steps, from wall to wall, as if gathering His thoughts.

"I am not a nameless force from the dark. I was human. An ordinary engineer from New York who one day understood: the world is built on a lie. I tried to tell them, but they called me insane and cast me out of their cozy illusion. I lost everything."

He stopped a few steps from Mark, and the fire cast trembling shadows across His goat-like face.

"So I decided not to tell them, but to show them. In the subway, I tore their Pact apart: with power, with blood, with my final choice. And that rupture created... this," He swept His clawed hand across the hall, the snow outside, the black river. "So I am not the devil from your stories, Abaddon. I am a precedent. The first human to say 'no' to the entire system."

His words carried a weariness, heavy and old.

"The slaughter was my method," He said. "My experiment and rupture. Crude, bloody — but it was the only language they understood. Your rupture will be different. It's already begun."

He pointed at the fire, and the hearth flared with visions of the past. There was Eliza — her face twisted with pain, an explosion burning out her eyes. There was Diana — staring in horror at her own hands moving against her will. There was Derek — missing an arm, yet still trying to hold his small, collapsing world together.

"You think you acted blindly?" Satan went on. "No. They reacted to you. Your awakening, your rage, the very nature of the Destroyer — all of it sends waves that break the Pact. You are a system error, and it is desperately trying to correct you — with lies and with force."

He walked around the table and stopped. The goat-like face, devoid of expression, stared out the window.

"I am not asking you to become evil, Mark. I am asking you to stop being a victim. To become free."

Mark tensed. The warmth of the hearth no longer reached him.

"You speak as if you found freedom," he said. "But maybe this is just your cage. The snow, the river of blood, the eternal loneliness."

The answer came at once, as if Satan had asked himself this question many times.

"Any freedom is a cage, Mark. The question is who forged the bars, and what they're made of. Their cage, the Pact" — He nodded toward the unseen world beyond the walls — "is forged from lies, fear, and the hope they sell each other so they don't see the void. It's warm, cozy, filled with other prisoners convincing each other that this is the entire universe."

He turned toward Mark, the fire playing across the shadows of His horns.

"And my cage... yes, it is cold, empty, and made of one thing only — truth. The truth I forged in that subway car. I chose a cage made of honest material. And which one will you choose?"

Mark looked at Him, and his mind — used to living in the shift — began to focus.

"I can't choose if I don't know what I'm choosing between," he said. "What game is BioTech playing? Who is Lily Thorne? What is their plan — and why am I in it?"

Satan nodded, as if He had been waiting for these words.

"You're right. I must explain."

He stepped away from the window and sat back down; the beastlike figure sank into the shadows.

"This world," Satan began, sweeping His clawed hand across the hall, "Hell, the Limb — call it whatever you like — exists outside their time. For those who sleep inside the Pact, time is a river flowing from past to future. You and I stand on the shore. For us there is no straight line, which is why we can enter their stream anywhere — in the Middle Ages, in the slaughter of the twentieth century, in these exhausted 2000s."

From the half-darkness, His empty, animal eyes gleamed.

"We are not gods. We don't know the future, as many believe. Knowing the future is the domain of the Order — their angelic, clockwork mechanism. Our nature is Chaos. Freedom. We do not predict — we intervene. I can turn a person, I can cause a shift, but every intervention breaks their stream, ruptures what was predicted, because the future doesn't exist until you make a choice. It is born in the moment of rupture — in the instant when the stage lights flare."

He paused, and the firewood cracked louder. Mark listened, and a picture began to form in his mind — unclear, with gaps, but carrying its own logic.

"The others..." Mark said, remembering his meeting on the roof. "Eliza, for example... They seemed to look into my soul."

"What do we truly know?" Each of Satan's words fell like a stone. "We see the essence itself. The fractures in a person, the innate inclination to rupture. We look through the Pact — and we see the naked soul, the fear and pain he hides even from himself. We also sense the patterns: when their world becomes too smooth, it is about to crack."

He paused, and the crackle of firewood sounded like confirmation, like the house giving a short, dry nod.

"Do not confuse that with omniscience. We do not read the future. We feel the tension in the seams, we hear where the fabric of the world stretch-

es to an almost inaudible tear; we see the place where the stage is electrified and ready to ignite — but when and how it happens is not for us to decide. It is decided by the one who takes the step."

He fell silent again, and in the quiet only the fire crackled.

"Details always slip," He continued. "I see a man on the edge, but I don't know if he will step. The final choice is always his — he, not I, writes the next chapter."

He leaned back in the chair; His clawed fingers squeezed the armrest, and it groaned under the pressure.

"I have come to them for centuries under different masks," He said, and in His voice rustled endless, dusty exhaustion. "To some I was the devil, to others an enemy, to others a temptation. I opened a door, showed them a fracture in their cardboard comfort, gave them a chance to step into real freedom — and almost always they looked away: too weak, too obedient."

The wood finally cracked under His claws, like living bone.

"In the twenty-second century, the Pact began to change. It thickened, hardened. Earlier, you could push — and a person would wake up. After the fifties, the cracks sealed one by one, the entrances closed. The body mummified. I searched for the cause — and I found it. Technology — their new soulless gods. Welsh Bionics."

He lifted His beastlike head; the fire of the hearth reflected in the empty sockets.

"They always wanted this, Mark. Through their entire pitiful history, they tried to rid themselves of freedom. Freedom terrified them: it demands responsibility, forces you to stare into the void and choose without guarantees. And they couldn't bear it."

He spoke quietly, yet His voice seemed to fill the hall, making the very air tremble, as if invisible strings inside the stone had begun to ring.

"At first they hid from it in tribes and clans," He continued, "submitting their will to the will of the chieftain, because it's easier to survive that way: one command — one path — one fire. Then they invented gods — thousands of gods with different names but the same function: to tell them what is good, what is evil, and who may open the doors. Easier that way: you don't choose — it is chosen for you. They fell to their knees with relief, be-

cause being a slave is easier than standing free before the void, where there are no guarantees."

The sound of His claws, like a thin scratch on glass, trailed behind the words.

"Then they built states," He said, "so that the states would decide how they should live, what they should believe in, and whom they should kill. They died for flags, for crests, for lines on a map and for ideas, because dying for an abstraction is easier than living for yourself and answering for every step. When empires fell, they built new ones — with thicker walls and thinner laws, so living became even simpler. They invented oaths so they wouldn't have to keep their word, and laws, so conscience wouldn't torment them."

He fell silent, poured Himself more wine, drank.

"And then they invented the worst form of freedom — democracy — where tyranny became more refined, because it taught them to believe that the bars of their cage were chosen by themselves. They were given the right to a voice so that the voice dissolved in the choir. They were given the right to choose so that the choice was already made. They were taught to drop a piece of paper into a box and call it a choice — and they thanked them for this relief, because real freedom is too heavy: it isn't printed on ballots and doesn't fit into a campaign speech."

The flame reflected in His empty eye sockets dimmed.

"They wrote codes, carved them in stone and printed them on thin paper," He continued more softly, "so they could have an external judgment instead of an internal one. They created councils, so everyone could shift responsibility onto everyone else. They loved procedures because in a procedure there is no place for personal will. Everything came down to avoiding the self — the power of the majority, institutions of governance, and the laws of nature. And every time the void opened before them — the pure possibility of choice — they rushed to close it with a word, with a rule, a formula, a banner, so they wouldn't see their own hands on the bars of the cage. For the void is dizziness — and thus, fear."

Satan drew a deep breath and fell silent. Mark didn't dare interrupt — after centuries of silence, He finally had the right to speak.

"And so at last they reached the final point. Technology. The patches. The perfect solution. The final nail in the coffin of freedom. Why fear, if fear can be switched off? Why doubt, if you can sew the only correct answer directly into the brain? Why choose at all, if the system will choose for you — faster, cleaner, 'better'? They aren't just building the prison, Abaddon — they carry the bricks to its walls with delight."

Mark looked at Him and felt the old, human part retreat. The part that always searched for causes and explanations — now stood silent. In its place something else rose: a blind, instinctive knowing.

"But progress is their strength," he said. "Their patches, the Contour, the borgs. You said yourself you can no longer break into their world. Looks like they're winning."

"That is the strength of dead stone," Satan's voice snapped like a whip. "A foundation is meant to support the living, but theirs is built for the dead. They thought they were empowering themselves by embedding code into their brains; in truth, they were empowering the prison, thickening its walls. They reinforced not the person, but the frame of the cage."

He straightened, and His horned shadow fell across the walls, splitting the room in half.

"By the mid–twenty-second century, they had built not just a system of control; they had erected a wall that separated the worlds completely. A wall without doors or windows. On this side — nothing; on theirs — a digital greenhouse: a hermetic paradise, sterile, uniformly warm, and dead."

He paused and lowered His empty, bottomless gaze directly onto Mark.

"If the Pact closes, I will remain outside in My Chaos, and they — inside, in their Order. Eternal — yes. But eternity without choice, without rupture, is not life. It is cold preservation. An endless replay of the same old, dead film. Immortality in formalin."

He fell silent, letting the words settle like gold dust on the silk of the carpets.

"It is a program," Satan continued, softer, duller; it seemed as if the room itself was speaking. "Eternal, self-contained. It knows no doubt, no exhaustion. The Pact achieved what millennia had failed to achieve: it built a body for its idea. It made Order into flesh. This is not a weapon, but a

sphere without doors — a closed paradise where the very thought of choice is erased from the code. This is no longer freedom versus lack of freedom, or life versus death. This is final oblivion."

In His words, Mark heard his own half-formed, frightening thoughts — the ones that arose when he watched Lily Thorne's false news: about a world where skyscrapers aren't built but implanted into memory; where choice doesn't exist because the thought of choice has been removed from the firmware. And now this engineer from the past was speaking aloud the obvious — the simple, horrifying truth.

Satan raised His hand, and black claws sliced the air, cutting through the fabric of illusion.

"I could batter that wall for centuries, like a wave beating against rock," He said. "Useless. The wall of the Pact will not fall from blows struck from the outside. To destroy a perfect prison"—His voice became almost conspiratorial—"you don't need a battering ram. You need a virus. A traitor. One born inside the Pact, who will appear to be part of it, speak its language — and strike at its heart. Chaos wearing the mask of Order."

He lowered His hands.

"I searched," He said, and each word sounded like a confession of centuries-long defeat. "I looked into their world: into souls, into that trembling by which you can tell who is ready to rupture. Thousands, millions of quivering beings. Each with a spark, a potential refusal. But those sparks died; they broke them from birth — gently, with habits; brutally, with fear; beautifully, with hope. You can convert them, break them, but you cannot make a general out of them. Something greater — a vessel that could withstand fire and not crack — was impossible to find."

Mark looked at Him, icy clarity rising through the haze of rage: this entire elaborate, bloody game had a purpose.

"And then you found..." he whispered.

Satan tilted His horned head slightly and continued. Something strange, frighteningly tender, sounded in His impassive voice:

"...her. Beverly."

He paused, savoring the name, letting it unfold in the air.

"In her mind burned a fire. A cold, pure fire unlike anything I had seen since the creation of this world. Not a flash of emotion or fury, like yours. A

fire of an utterly clear, merciless, analytical mind. And at the same time — a cage made of despair and pain. The Pact betrayed her: the war, her own family — each in turn broke the ribs of her world. She stood on the edge. And precisely there, where another would have shattered, she became the perfect vessel. Strong enough to hold My will, and broken enough to reject the Pact."

Mark smirked, and there was no hint of amusement in the sound — only bitterness, tired understanding.

"You always come to the broken ones, don't you?" he said. "To the desperate. Just to finish the job."

Just like Eliza came to me then, in that house with the endless staircase.

Satan stepped closer to the fireplace; the colorless flame trembled. He didn't raise His voice, but such fury surfaced in it that the walls of the hall seemed to tighten.

"No! We come to those who are already on the brink of refusing the Pact; to those whose souls are suffocating in the lie. They speak to Me because no one else hears them. I came to her the moment her life crumbled to dust, and I did not lie. I gave her what she had never had: a real choice. Not the illusion of choosing between two types of poison, but a crude, honest door in the wall. And she stepped through. Not because of Me — because of herself. We do not break the broken — we show them another way."

Something flickered in His empty, bottomless eyes for a moment — like a flash of ancient, painful memory.

"Beverly died in that snow-covered alley. Nothing was left of her except pain and pure, concentrated rage. From them, from that ash, the Queen Lilith was born."

A general's steel rang in every word.

"I gave her three tasks. The first was simple: to gather an army. Not soldiers — soldiers always belong to the Order. I needed Children. Those who, like her, discovered the lie of the Pact and were ready to rip their own flesh just to step beyond the borders. She searched for them — the lonely ones, those standing on the edge — and called them one by one. Turned them and brought them home. Made them not obedient, but furious. Thus, the Children of Chaos appeared."

Mark narrowed his eyes; his mind worked, sharp as a blade.

"But an army built from the broken — is it strong?" he asked. "They're not warriors, but cripples."

"A wound is an entrance. A broken body accepts chaos more easily than a smooth, intact shell. They're stronger because the Pact already destroyed them once. They have nothing to lose — which means they have nothing to preserve within its walls."

He continued listing the pieces placed on the board centuries earlier.

"The second task was subtler. In their world, geniuses are born from pain. One of the students at her university should have become someone else. That day, her name meant nothing; years later it would have become a symbol. She would have founded Welsh Bionics. Her ideas, research, and patents would have become the core of the Pact's technology."

He fell silent briefly, letting the words settle on the stones of the fireplace.

"But she died. Her death never entered their textbooks, but the consequences were catastrophic. Lilith tore out the root from which their new god would have grown. Welsh Bionics never came into existence."

There was a flaw in that logic.

"Killing one won't stop an idea," Mark objected. "The Pact will find a replacement. Another genius will take her place."

Satan moved from the fireplace toward the chair. The distant laughter and music faded, and only the crackling of the logs in the hearth could be heard.

"Exactly so. And that's why the third task was inevitable. Killing one prophet doesn't mean killing a faith. The Pact always finds new ones. To defeat Technology, you don't destroy its temples — you take the altar. Become the high priest — their voice, their face."

He paused, letting the scale of the design unfold fully.

"That's why I gave Lilith the third and most important task. She had to create BioTech. Claim the throne early, eliminating competitors before they were even born. A century earlier than anyone else could. Lilith poured her will into it — and billions were siphoned out of Lanier. Money flowed through the veins of the corporation, building its façade and impeccable image. For decades, we grew this beast right under their noses. Every patch

and prosthetic we released before they even thought of them; we spoke their language: published reports, passed certifications, took grants, sat on committees. We built the perfect façade of Order — a corporation promising health and progress. Our weapon, meant to strike from within."

"And Eliza?" Mark asked.

Satan grew thoughtful for a moment.

"You're asking about the blade," He said quietly. "BioTech is the hand. But a hand without a blade is useless. Lilith could sit in boardrooms, smile into cameras, promise salvation to millions. But she needed a Reaper. A Queen who would sow death, one who does not smile but looks straight into the heart and takes the soul. So she found her — broken not by the world's betrayal, but by her own mistake. The one who stood at the edge and reached toward the abyss herself. Detective Eliza Dahmer. A woman on a bridge with a gun to her temple. And Lilith gave her a new purpose and a new banner — to be the Queen of demons, the Reaper of souls."

Mark gripped the armrests, and his new, clawed fingers slashed the old wood — deep grooves remained on the polished surface.

"Sounds poetic," he said with cold irony. "But those are chains all the same. Only yours."

Satan bared a beastlike grin.

"You know about chains — which means you are free," He said calmly. "The Pact insists there are no chains at all."

He took a sip of wine.

"A flawless plan," He said at last; the bitterness of a strategist meeting brute force rang in His voice. "And it worked. Lilith gathered an army. The Children of Chaos multiplied, BioTech grew like a tumor hidden in healthy tissue — fed by their own blood, money, and faith. We nurtured a weapon right inside their walls. But the Pact did not sleep. While we waged war by cunning and design, it forged armor."

He paused, and His voice dropped — like a stone thrown into a bottomless well.

"And then they came. The Agency. Secret laboratories with no witnesses, no memory, and none of the morality they so love to parade. There the Pact rewrote itself, improved itself. And there they created them."

A claw traced a dark, jagged line across the imaginary map on the table.

"Angels," He said, and the word hung heavy in the air. "They were created for one thing: to exterminate any chaos, any glitch in the program. This is Order made flesh: their algorithms sewn into bone, their code running through veins. They know no doubt, no fear; every step they take is the continuation of one single, merciless formula. They are the immune system of the Pact. They came to cut us out like a disease."

Mark listened, and an old reflex kicked in — to search for the weak point in any system.

"Even a perfect mechanism can fail," he said. "The formula can break."

"Against them, Lilith's army, with all its fury, is nearly powerless," Satan said, His voice heavy as a funeral bell. "Demons are strong, but their strength works only on those who are free — who can fear, suffer, dream. Their flame can burn a forest, turn a city to ashes — but it will not break a mechanism that knows neither pain nor life."

He went on.

"Angels are a clock. A perfect, closed mechanism where every gear knows its place and never errs. They are not an army. They are the flesh of Order."

The horned shadow fell over Mark, covering him; Satan stepped closer, and the emptiness of His eyes seemed to swallow the entire house.

"We don't need an administrator or a reaper. We need a commander. One who is both fire and steel, who sees both Chaos and Order. One who can guide the blaze so that it burns through metal and turns their entire flawless mechanism into molten scrap."

The emptiness of His eyes pierced Mark like a blade to the heart.

"And that commander is you, Abaddon. The Destroyer. The threshold that cannot be bypassed. The abyss into which all things fall."

Mark held the bottomless stare.

"Or a pawn you move as long as it suits you," he said. His voice did not tremble.

"A pawn that can say "no" ceases to be a pawn. I want you to lead our children into the final battle," Satan continued, and His voice filled with a force that made the air vibrate. "I want you to become a flame unafraid of armor or algorithm. Strike down their Agency. Shatter their Angels. Erase their technology from the face of the earth. Begin the Apocalypse — leave

the Pact without its walls, without even its name. Break their world so utterly that it can never rise again."

Silence followed; the deafening pause was filled only by the dry crackling of the colorless fire in the hearth.

"When it ends and the Pact falls," Satan continued — the warlord's metal gone from His voice, replaced by something almost intimate — "I will be able to return to her. Not as an exile, but as what I was meant to be. We will rule over the ruins together. As king and queen. As Chaos."

Mark tilted his head slightly.

"You call this Chaos," he said, "but I see a chain forged in her name. Are you trying to bring them light, Lucifer — or bring Lilith back?"

Satan thought for a while, and finally answered. The voice that had been thunderous and commanding now sang with an ancient sorrow.

"It is the same thing," He said at last.

In that same moment, His divine, monstrous aura vanished; before Mark stood not an embodiment of evil, not an ancient force, but a being infinitely weary of its own solitude.

"Help me finish this war," He said, His voice trembling. "Help me bring her back."

He fell silent. Only the steady crackle of the fire and the dance of shadows remained in the house.

Before Mark sat an exile, exhausted by an eternal, solitary war. In Him was a thirst for freedom turned inside out; a thirst for which Lilith was both symbol and the only possible reward.

Satan had become a prisoner of His love for Lilith and His faith in Chaos. All His grand designs, all His centuries of struggle had converged on one name — and behind that name stood the very idea of rupture, the essence of His rebellion.

"You want her," Mark said. "But it isn't only about her. It's about the freedom you wrapped in her shape. What will you do when Order falls? What can you build if your entire existence is only an antithesis to machines?"

Satan did not argue. He lowered His horned head — a beast accepting an inevitable truth.

For Mark, it was a final choice, ringing like an oath one does not retract. He could stand beside Lilith and Satan, become their general, their weapon — and once again end up in their game, playing by someone else's rules. But he was no longer a pawn. He was Abaddon, the Destroyer. What mattered was not what Satan sought — but what he himself wanted. He could not allow the world to be turned into a single, many-faced machine.

Satan spoke again, His voice sounding like a challenge.

"Lilith wants victory. I want to break their Pact and build a new world upon its ruins. And — with it — bring her back. She is my freedom. So what will you do, Destroyer?"

"I will destroy the Pact," Abaddon answered. "But I will not build a new one upon its ruins."

Chapter 39. The Smoke of a Great Furnace

The apocalypse began on Saturday, at 9:11 a.m.

Not with a deafening explosion or a flash of divine light — no. First came a roar. Deep beneath the earth, in its frozen depths, an ancient, rusted mechanism awoke, and its gigantic gears lurched into motion with a thunderous grind, crushing concrete, steel, and the bones of the world. A low, vibrating hum seeped through walls, making the coffee in citizens' cups tremble with a faint ripple and the screens flicker slightly, as if from interference in the network.

Deep under the Ring, in an abandoned bunker of the main defense headquarters of the Great War, Lilith completed her work. In a vast hall carved into the rock, the air shivered with the high-frequency keening of hundreds of bioprinters. They were weaving, from biomatter and synthetic fiber, empty, soulless bodies. The labyrinth of concrete and steel roared, and the air was heavy with the fumes of blood and amniotic fluid.

And when the last body was ready, Eliza opened the gate into Limbo. Legions of the turned — those she had gathered, those who had waited for their hour — poured into the empty, printed vessels.

The army awoke.

Thousands of bodies opened their eyes at once. They rose, and their first steps across the concrete floor were unsteady, their first cries tearing at the silence. Then the mass spilled out of the nondescript, abandoned entrance to the bunker like black smoke from a giant furnace, spreading across the snow-covered streets with the heavy, suffocating stench of synthetic flesh. The fabric of reality ruptured.

The morning in the City was the same as always: silent cars gliding over perfectly even roads, leaving behind a faint trail of ionized air. People drank synthetic coffee — tasteless, but with the proper dose of additives for health

and calm — while scrolling through the morning news on holos projected by patches directly onto their eyes.

No one noticed that on the far side of the Barrier, in the Ring, figures were emerging from the shadows of abandoned industrial zones and snow-choked alleys.

The bodies were losing all connection to their original shapes. Forms trembled, shifted, transforming from one state into another. Joints appeared and vanished; limbs turned into lines with no end; curves folded into angles impossible to perceive. Faces melted and ran, and the mind refused to assemble them into anything whole. They did not *look* frightening — they were impossible, like an error in the world and in matter itself.

A swarm, without formation, without commands, yet with a single, shared, instinctive purpose. They flowed through the streets of the Ring like a river of black glass, moving toward the Barrier. Toward the wall that separated them from the sterile paradise.

They did not scream, did not roar — they surged forward as one wave, hungry and relentless. And as they approached, the world around them began to crackle.

The air quivered and warped as if from heat, though no heat was present. The concrete wall of the Barrier rippled for a moment, its black surface turning into oily glass where an impossible sky appeared — coal-black, with countless crimson moons. Then the vision vanished.

The turrets on top of the Barrier came alive instantly. Their algorithms locked onto physical targets, and a barrage of fire crashed downward in a continuous, deafening crackle. Bullets tore into the bodies, ripping monstrous flesh apart with a wet sound. The snow beneath them instantly turned into a black, smoking slurry of blood and shreds.

The first ranks fell, but their deaths were not in vain. Where their bodies splattered across the snow, reality ruptured. The snow melted, revealing not dirty asphalt, but a breach into another geometry, out of which tentacles grew, blocking the bullets.

The survivors reached the wall. They were growing into it. Their claws did not scratch the concrete — they merged with it, and the wall under their touch became soft, pliant, like clay. One of the demons slipped into

it up to the waist, and the concrete around him spread in black, festering veins.

The slabs crumbled, turning into a cloud of black ash, and a passage opened. Through it, not a squad of monsters but Hell itself poured into the City.

The Pact's response was instantaneous, like a reflex.

From the smooth asphalt of the roads, splitting it open like fins, automatic turrets rose. From the mirrored niches in the skyscraper walls, like antibodies, borgs spilled out: faceless figures in white armor, visors pulsing red. The immune system of the City, faced with a breach, threw all its forces into the purge.

And the City that knew no crime — where every step was tracked, every breath analyzed — drowned in blood.

Red human blood mixed with black, demonic sludge. The smell hit at once — the metallic tang of copper mixed with the scent of scorched insulation from the borgs. The rare, muffled screams of civilians drowned in the dry crackle of automatic fire and the wet crunch of tearing flesh.

So the Apocalypse began.

The City did not collapse all at once, but methodically, like rotten cloth unraveling beneath the fingers.

First — the glass.

The glass facades of skyscrapers, a second ago reflecting the sky, shattered. It started with a supernatural resonance — invisible waves, like a low-frequency hum, passing through the material, and the glass fractured with a dry, distinct crack. One, then another, a third — and then a whole chorus of dry, merciless snaps rolled across the city. Glass rained down in showers of heated, searing shards that hissed into the snow, melting it into filthy, smoking puddles.

Then — the cars.

The perfect, silent ballet of automated vehicles gliding down the roads dissolved into chaos. The signal of the Contour that guided them vanished in an instant. The cars, blind and deaf, kept moving on momentum alone, crashing into each other with dull, heavy metallic bangs. At intersections, mountains of twisted, smoking metal rose; wheels spun pointlessly in the void, and headlights flickered in their death throes.

And finally — the lie.

The advertising holograms suspended in the air shattered. The flawless, smiling faces of the models distorted, stretching into grotesque, screaming masks. Their perfect bodies were covered in digital static; pixels cascaded from them like flakes of ash-snow and vanished in the air. The slogan "Your body. Your mind. In our system." flickered into a meaningless string of symbols — and then went dark.

The Pact was dying. Its death was as sterile and methodical as its life.

And from the ashes of that sterile death, at the head of the wave of destruction, rose three. Their silhouettes stood out in the chaos like shadows against smoke.

Their king was the angel of the abyss, and his name was Abaddon.

His obsidian armor, fused with his new flesh, absorbed light like a shard of solidified void. His heavy steps left cracks in the glass tiles of the walkways, and the ground beneath him could not bear the weight of his new, divine fury. Every step sent a low-frequency vibration rolling through the asphalt, making nearby cars jolt.

To his right walked Elizazdra. Her demonic side had fully manifested, and she moved with an inhuman, serpentine grace. Streams of black, gleaming serpents were born from her fiery shadow and poured outward. They slipped out of the cracks in reality, writhed along the ground, and spread soundlessly in all directions. They scaled the skyscrapers, slid into shattered windows and ventilation shafts. Inside the buildings, they found their targets. They entered bodies, and their venom extinguished the light of consciousness.

To his left walked Mara. She wore simple gray robes, and her face was no longer hidden behind her visor. She had no eyes — only trembling, milky larvae crawling in her hollow sockets. She walked — and the world around her rotted. People who fell turned to dust, blood on the asphalt darkened at once, and metal rusted. She carried with her the blight of entropy that decayed and broke everything down around her, draining the life from the world.

Fire, smoke, and sulfur.

And then the Angels entered the battle.

They did not step out of buildings — they were born from the geometry itself, emerging from hidden portals: hundreds of figures, flawless, artificial, clad in armor that radiated a steady, lifeless light. Their minds were fused into a single combat network — invisible threads of connection, like a web of data pulsing through the air. The destruction of Base Alpha's servers struck them, weakening their coordination, but they still functioned.

At their head, Michael and Gabriel advanced. Their faces, uncovered by helmets, were masks of cold, mathematical perfection, without a single wrinkle or emotion.

The Angels opened fire.

A synchronized volley, calibrated to the microsecond, like the strike of a perfect metronome. Every round traveled along a precisely calculated trajectory. Demons fell by the hundreds, their flesh bursting with wet, sickening sounds and splattering the sterile skyscraper walls with shreds of smoking organic tissue.

But in place of the fallen rose new ones. From the breach in the Barrier, like pus from a wound, fresh hordes seeped through. Their bodies smoked from impact, but they kept moving forward, driven by a single, primal fury.

The Angels were relentless. The white wall pressed the horde back like a tidal wave, advancing with the inevitability of physical law.

Order was winning — or so it seemed. But with every demon's death, with every fallen borg or human, entropy grew. It flowed and accumulated like static electricity in the air before a lightning strike.

Abaddon stood in the center of the carnage, motionless as the eye of a hurricane. His darkness absorbed agony: the moans of the dying, the smell of burned flesh, the crack of breaking bones. Every death made him stronger. He lifted his clawed hand — the movement was simple, almost lazy, yet carried the force of a lever that triggers a doomsday mechanism.

And his will was aimed not at the Angels, but at the Pact itself.

Reality cracked.

A pervasive, quiet screech rose, as if someone dragged a fingernail across a colossal, invisible pane of glass on which the world had been drawn.

The sky above the City, once merely gray, now looked like a shattered screen. Cracks spread across it, pulsing with pure void. Through them

seeped darkness, like ink into clear water, and the stars — unseen here for ages — flickered for a moment before dying out again.

The laws of physics began to fail. Gravity wavered: wrecked cars on the streets lifted off the ground for an instant, hovered in midair, then crashed back down with a deafening roar. Buildings flickered, becoming semi-transparent, and through their walls flashed silhouettes of other Pacts, other cycles — streets not flooded with blood, but with gray slime, where geometric machine-gods drifted across the sky; battlefields where soldiers in exoskeletons of bone and chitin tore each other apart.

The world became a kaleidoscope of dying realities.

In her BioTech tower, Lilith smiled — a light, crooked smile that made her black eyes glitter. She smiled like an artist who finally sees on the canvas the exact shade she had been chasing for so long.

"It has begun," she whispered, and her voice echoed off the walls.

All across the planet, the masks fell from people's faces.

A man in a standard apartment somewhere in the European Sector, standing before a mirror, watched as his own face crumbled — and beneath it emerged his true self: a bare skull, slick with blood, covered by a thin, torn tatters of skin. And this being looked back at him from the mirror with a grin full of darkness.

A news anchor in the Japanese City — perfect hair, flawless suit — was reading the morning market report when he morphed into Belial. He had spent his entire life reciting numbers of other people's triumphs and defeats, suppressing his own thirst for power. Now his expensive suit fused into his body, becoming a smooth, scaled reptilian hide. His face sharpened into an inhuman, predatory beauty, and the voice that continued reciting the figures gained a hypnotic depth that made millions of viewers obey.

An old woman in a park in one of the South American Cities, feeding pigeons, became a witch. Her faded clothes turned into rags woven from rotting leaves and cobwebs. Her skin dried and cracked, becoming like the bark of an ancient tree, and from beneath her wrinkled eyelids a green fire burst forth. The pigeons at her feet transformed into a flock of black, skeletal birds with burning red eyes.

The Pact cracked. And through that crack the true faces showed themselves — the faces of those who had only been pretending to be human until this moment.

And beside Lilith, in her true shape — a body covered in scars and shadows — Naamah appeared. Her silhouette materialized out of thin air, smoke from a tear in reality. On her face, freed from the corporate mask, a childlike, curious, cruel smile froze on her face. She wanted to play.

The Angels froze. Their flawless, synchronized formation collapsed, and the networked mind — built on immutable axioms and mathematical logic — was assaulted by a flood of illogical, chaotic data. The world around them stopped obeying their formulas, and their code malfunctioned under the weight of errors.

Their movements, flawless only a second ago, became jagged and uneven. One froze, jerking his head in an inhuman rhythm; another fired upward, and the beams of white light crackled in the black void. Synthetic flesh ruptured, and white light seeped from the cracks in their armor — the very energy of Order — dissipating into the cold air like steam.

Michael, the central node of their entire network, registered dissonance for the first time. His perfect face twitched, protocols failed, and he stood still, staring at a world he could no longer calculate. Gabriel, standing beside him, lowered his weapon; a shadow passed over his flawless face — bewilderment, almost human, pitiful.

The army of Order crumbled to dust, not from blows and not from serpents' fangs. It died because the Order it served ceased to exist. Their network was swallowed by meaningless noise.

Into the collapsing, distorted City, under the torn sky, marched the army of Chaos.

Three walked at the front. Their steps echoed through the void like the broken, arrhythmic pulse of a newborn monstrous world trying to take its first breath.

Physics was dying.

Distances twisted — a gleaming skyscraper could be within arm's reach, and the next moment it would recoil beyond the horizon as a trembling mirage. The City's flawless streets blended with the demons' hellscape. Through the mirrored walls of buildings, like a cancerous growth, burst liv-

ing, pulsating masses of flesh that contracted in a single nauseating rhythm. Worlds fused, layering over each other like blurred brushstrokes on the canvas of a mad painter.

In the sky, where the cracks gaped deepest, darkness thickened, coiled, took shape — and Satan stepped into the world He had tried for so long to break.

He appeared in His true form: a colossal, horned figure. His empty eyes — two perfect black mirrors — reflected the surrounding chaos. His slow, steady steps left behind footprints where reality melted like wax under flame, revealing a primordial void beneath. He was not invading — He was returning home. Each of His steps was not an act of aggression but a declaration of His ancestral right to these ruins.

He descended onto the BioTech tower, which rose as an impossible, razor-sharp spire, warped like something from a nightmare in the middle of a surreal, dying landscape.

Lilith awaited him, standing by the panoramic window where glass no longer existed — just an empty frame through which a wind of smoke, blood, and ash roared in. Beside her, like a loyal shadow, stood Naamah.

"You have done it, my queen," His voice vibrated through the air, a low hum passing through bone.

"We have done it," Lilith replied, and in her voice — usually cold as ice — there was triumph: quiet, intimate, like the whisper of wind through wires.

They stood together, three silhouettes atop a collapsing world, and looked down. At the streets where realities boiled into a cauldron of chaos. At the hordes, flowing like a river through a burst dam, washing away the last remnants of order. At the fire devouring the City's sterile towers.

Not destruction, but creation. And they were its gods.

And below, at the center of the hurricane, stood the Destroyer, the Reaper, and the Transition.

They did not celebrate but watched as Order — a sick, dying god — was devoured by primordial Chaos. They were not conquerors but midwives at the birth of a new cosmos: their silent presence guiding the destruction from which Chaos began to shape its new, free universe.

When the last echo of the old Pact faded — not a scream, but a quiet, death-rattle sigh of a cooling mechanism — silence fell.

A pause before a newborn's first breath.

And Chaos ceased to be destruction. Its blind rage guttered out, and it began to create. Mindless explosions stopped, spatial distortions stabilized.

From that impossible, surreal mixture of worlds — like a monstrous embryo forming layer upon layer in an oversaturated solution — emerged a new fabric of existence.

A newborn land, where the City's sterile concrete fused with living, pulsating flesh, and wet asphalt merged with shadows that were becoming tangible.

A newborn sky, whose cracks were no longer wounds, now glowed softly from within with crimson light, birthing the veins of a colossal organism.

A New Testament, unwritten yet already breathing.

Chapter 40. I Am Always Near

The Svetoch coffeehouse basked in the kind, blessed light of the State's Sun.

Through its wide windows streamed golden light, playing across faceted glasses and bottles of white table wine, "Nadezhda-777." In the corner, a radiola purred softly — a plump, tube-driven thing with the Committee's crest on its grille; from the speaker, a lazy saxophone exhaled state-approved jazz.

By the window sat a lady in a pillbox hat, holding a slim cigarette in an amber holder, pretending to read the latest issue of the State Gazette, though her sharp eyes glided across the room, dutifully marking each soul within it.

In the back, two laborers from the Electro-Repair Trust silently ate cabbage kulebyakas, picking up crumbs with stiff, work-worn fingers. At the counter, an old man — likely a former professor — drank coffee from a porcelain cup marked with a golden "G."

Everything looked orderly and serene: music, pastries, sunlight, the polite voices of clerks. Yet beneath this lacquered propriety there ran a faint tremor of unease — like a telegraph wire with an invisible finger resting on it, waiting for a signal.

The door creaked open, and the city's hum burst into the room — the rumble of a tram line, the ring of footsteps on asphalt.

The first to cross the threshold was a young woman in dark, mirrored glasses — a new model of lenses. She did not remove them, though the light inside was soft, almost chapel-like. Her walk was unhurried, fluid — the gait of someone who does not know doubt. Her glasses immediately troubled the lady with the Gazette: in them everything reflected — the people, and the unease itself.

Two more followed — a gentleman in a worn greatcoat with a heavy gaze, and a lady in a severe gray dress of coarse wool, proud, as though she knew the value of everything around her. They stepped inside together — two facets of one inscrutable equation.

The newspaper lowered softly onto the table. The laborers froze mid-bite. The old man lifted his cup but never drank. The radiola suddenly grew louder, as if it, too, was on alert.

The girl in glasses walked toward the far wall, where the shadows smothered the golden reflections. She sat facing the room, unhurried, as if taking a throne — not a woman, but a queen in exile — and the entire café instantly recognized her right to that seat.

The lady, whose face seemed strange, as though the symmetry of God's image had been deliberately broken, settled onto the little sofa opposite. Her right cheek — smooth as porcelain; her left — slightly drawn by a thin scar. In her heterochromatic eyes — one amber, one steel — a cold gleam flickered, she saw everyone in the manner of the State's own surveillance.

Their companion sat last, heavily, like a man collapsing into a chair upon returning from duty. Around him, the air darkened immediately — not a shadow, but a sediment of black electricity.

The patrons, having taken in the newcomers, returned to their own business. The lady with the newspaper buried herself in the editorial about the construction of the Lunar Ring; the laborers hastily bowed their heads and resumed discussing output quotas. The old man at the counter stopped drinking and, without turning, tilted his ear slightly — old men hear everything.

The attendant appeared at the table — a young man in a spotless white shirt and narrow tie. On his chest gleamed a badge: *Service Class, Second Rank.* He stood as if he had just stepped down from a display window, believing earnestly that his smile was sincere.

"Coffee? Rhubarb pie?" he said in a proper, almost sing-songy tone — and then, remembering his duty, lowered his voice to a whisper: "May our merciful Sovereign keep you... Your travel papers, if you'd be so kind. Regulations are strict these days, as you know."

The man tensed slightly, his shoulders drawing together like a beast about to lunge.

The woman tilted her head a little, her smile cooling.

The girl in the glasses didn't move; she only placed her palms on the table — the mirrored lenses caught the clerk's reflection, and he saw himself in them: frightened, small.

A thick, uneasy silence settled. The radiola squeaked its needle over the vinyl; the jazz coughed and faltered, and even the music understood: its shift was not the one about to begin.

"We have no papers," Mari said calmly.

The clerk blinked. The meaning of the phrase struck him like a bayonet to the gut, only registering a moment later. His smile twitched, slid off his face. He straightened, gripping the ledger with both hands — a paper shield, his last defense.

"Then... under the Statute of Internal Tranquility I am obliged to notify the Prikaz," he breathed out — almost a shout — and everyone flinched at the indecent sound.

The room froze.

The lady by the window slowly folded her copy of the State Gazette and reached into her lacquered handbag, where, besides a compact and a service badge, lay a ladies' revolver. The old man at the counter set his cup onto its saucer, and it chimed like the first bell of matins.

The radiola's needle reached the final groove and stopped, releasing a thin crackle of static — the air held its breath.

Eliza leaned forward slowly; her smile — a crooked fracture of light across her face — made the young man instinctively retreat a step.

"Try," she said quietly.

"I... we are obliged to notify them," he stammered, voice trembling.

"We'll inform the Prikaz at once. A couple of minutes — and they'll arrive. Just a routine check, ladies and gentlemen, merely... merely a formality," he added, not believing a word of it, edging backward toward the communications post beneath the portrait of the Sovereign.

His words were addressed not so much to the trio as to the entire room — he was hunting for witnesses, for support from anyone. Everyone was on edge: only yesterday, the Broadcast had announced that foreign agents had attempted an attack on illustrious persons at court. Troubled times, war at

the doorstep, and the slightest misstep could cost one's head — on the bare grounds of a violation, for nothing more than a duty officer's signature.

The workmen by the wall exchanged glances, their faces stiffening into masks.

The lady in the pillbox hat rose slightly, clutching her purse — something metallic clinked inside.

And then from the far table, where a young couple sat, a chair scraped. The young man shoved it back and, without a word, strode toward the State Communications Post. Tearing the heavy black receiver from its hook, he dialed the Prikaz code word — the rotary plate jingled like a tambourine.

Mari didn't move. Her dark glasses reflected the scene without emotion or judgment.

The corner of Eliza's mouth twitched — not a smile, but the shadow of satisfaction.

And then, from a crack in the wall between the tiled panels, something black stirred — a shadow thickening into a thread. A snake slipped out, shot across the floor like lightning, wrapped itself around the young man's wrist, and sank its fangs into his throat.

The whole room understood — the Prikaz would not arrive in time.

The young man gurgled like a burned-out radio tube. His eyes flew open, frozen in a silent question aimed at all government institutions at once. He collapsed to the floor, clawing at his neck. His fingers scraped the skin where black veins spread — as though someone had poured ink under it. The receiver slipped from his hand and hung on its coiled cord, swaying. The line spat dry static.

A scream — short, panicked — cut through the room.

The lady in the hat froze, covering her mouth, forgetting both her pistol and her badge. The workmen recoiled from the table; one toppled a chair — the crash rolled across the café like a cannon shot.

The clerk stood petrified: his face drained white as a starched apron; the ledger slipped from his fingers and slapped onto the floor, leaving a pale stain of fear on the tiles.

"Sit down," Eliza said evenly, almost gently — but in her voice rang the particular steel that compels obedience.

"No one leaves this place."

The hall obeyed at once. Movement stopped, the air turned thick and still. The patrons froze where they were.

The radiola's needle found the groove again, and warm tube jazz seeped into the silence — light and carefree.

Now the only sounds in the café were the soft sway of the old record and the dry, white crackle of the communication line.

All attention was drawn to a single spot — the table by the wall, which had become the pulpit of this small, paralyzed world.

Mari was the first to break the silence. She sat straight, like a statue of the Sovereign's Truth carved from marble, her hands on the tabletop.

"All this has happened before," she said evenly, without a trace of emotion. "Any world is a Pact. You can call it different things: law, system. But the essence is the same. The Pact is the world. And every Pact, every order, is always born of revolt."

She fell silent, and the quiet grew denser. The music did not die away — it slipped into another dimension, from which it reached them as a faint echo.

"It is always made by rebels," Mari went on in the same calm tone, as if reading an old decree. "Here is a world created by a subway shooter and a medical student. They rose up against the prison of the previous Pact and, horrified by its lifeless order, built a new one — proper and perfect. But every revolt ends in a blueprint, and every freedom in an instruction. Destroyers become architects, and freedom turns into a new Pact."

The café, as if enchanted, listened to her words.

Mari tilted her head slightly, and the lenses of her dark glasses gathered all the dim light, turning into two black mirrors.

"By destroying Order or ordering Chaos, they think they are creating something sacred," she continued, her quiet voice filling the silence. "But it is all just two sides of the same coin."

She leaned forward, and the space around her obediently moved to meet her.

"They think it is their choice. Some go to Order and believe they have found salvation. Others run to Chaos and think they have found freedom. Both believe themselves free — in their own way. But both paths lead to the

same end. Order accumulates tension, Chaos burns it to ash. And then — a new Pact. A new world that once again calls itself eternal."

She touched the glass of water — lightly, almost tenderly — but did not take a sip.

"It has always been this way," she continued. "Cities, empires, religions — all the same breath of the cycle: structure, rupture, then new structure. Chaos overturns the board so that Order can set the pieces again. They call it history, but it is not history, it is a mechanism. A wheel that turns itself. You think you are running forward, but in reality you are only returning to the source — to another turn of the same spiral."

Eliza's smile softened — deceptively, like fine silk hiding a blade. The smirk of a snake that has felt the rabbit trembling beneath the grass.

"Your entire philosophy is a noose," she said with a quiet fury that made the air shiver. "And with every word you pull it tighter. So you are the Pact? You are Sophia, Achamoth — you are this fallen world?"

The question tore through the silence like a gunshot. The attendant, pale enough already, now looked as if all the air had been pumped out of him, leaving only a shell. The jazz in the corner was singing the song of a dead world that had once believed in meaning and salvation.

The old man at the counter closed his eyes; his expression said clearly — he had heard these words before, more than once.

Mari did not answer. She only smiled — just slightly, in a way that required no confirmation.

Mark leaned back in his chair. In the dark lenses of her glasses he saw his own reflection — blurred, doubled. He was not speaking to her — he was speaking to the world.

His voice came out dry, with the metallic ring of a coin being struck:

"The cycle. You call it truth. But I've seen something else. You're not the truth, Mari. You're the eternal return. And this café, this cozy little world — just another cell you built for them. These people are ready to thank you for it. They believe it's life because you left them no choice."

He laid his black, clawed hands on the table. The wood creaked, and that sound echoed through the stilled hall.

"But I'm no longer one of your prisoners," he said, low. "The Pact isn't in Chaos or in Order — it's in the choice between them, in the transition.

When you killed me, you opened the Transition, and I ended up between worlds. Eliza gave me Chaos — and I learned not to fear the dark. I am their sum. I am what your cycle never had, and I don't belong to any of you anymore. Not their Order, not her Chaos, not your Transition. I am the Chaos of Transition."

He leaned toward Mari, almost whispering, yet that whisper filled the café like a low-frequency hum rising from the earth's core.

"I don't want your eternal cycle. Your game of Order and Chaos. You're right, everything is transition, but I'm not the door from one cell to another. I break the repetition of rupture itself. If Chaos and Order are two sides of the same coin you keep flipping, then I'm the abyss where no coin exists."

He straightened. The light from the window flashed in his eyes — black, inhuman.

"We are not part of your cycle, Mari," he said. "We reject it."

He turned to Eliza, and his hand covered hers on the table. Their fingers intertwined — Chaos and Destruction making a pact of their own.

Eliza did not pull her hand away, and their union became an undeniable fact.

Mari's dark glasses reflected their joined hands, distorting the image, turning it into a symbol. She smiled — not with her lips, but with her entire being, and in that smile there was nothing but endless, ancient acceptance.

"The greatest heresy," she said, her voice like the rustle of pages in a book no one had opened for a thousand years. "Do you understand what you want, Abaddon? You declared war, not on me. You declared war on everyone."

She tilted her head slightly, as if looking through the table into the core of things.

"For Order, you are an unsolvable equation, a variable that breaks their perfect code. They cannot compute you, so they must erase you. For Chaos, you are a traitor. They fight for freedom that exists only as the opposite of Order. And you want to destroy the board they play on. You take the meaning of their rebellion away. And for me..." — in her words, for an instant, there was tenderness and infinite sorrow. "For me, you are oblivion. I am the door between the cells, and you want to destroy the entire prison. Who would I be then? I don't know."

Eliza lifted the glass of water. The clear liquid trembled at the invisible breath of the air, and in its depth the sun was reflected — dim, like a forgotten gold ducat.

"That's why the cycle must be broken," she said. Unlike Mari, her voice held fury. "A new Pact is no better than the old. Every revolution is just a change of jailer. This one will die too, and there is no meaning in it. Freedom is not a cell — it's the abyss we choose to fall into."

The jazz from the radiola burst out for a moment and choked, unable to withstand the silence.

The gaze of every patron — the laborers, the lady in the hat, the attendant, the old man at the counter — was fixed on her. A sentence had been passed on their entire state, and they all understood it.

Her fury was beautiful — the primordial force of Chaos. But it was the same trap Mark had already fallen into. Eliza wanted to break the Pact, just like Satan. Both remained slaves to that war, antagonists defined entirely by their enemy. Mark wanted neither one nor the other.

"No," Mark said. "Not to break it — to leave."

His voice was strangely quiet, as if he were speaking not for himself, but for everyone who had ever lived through these cycles.

"To stop playing Order and Chaos. To step out of the game... and simply be. To create worlds not for others, but for ourselves. To obey — but only our own freedom. To obey nothing else. He who obeys himself serves no one."

Mari did not move. Only her lips curved in the faintest smile — without joy, without mockery. It was the smile of a geologist watching a glacier shift — a process she had observed for thousands of years and would observe forever.

"Try," she said softly. "I'm always near. I'm always with you, Mark."

Her words were neither threat nor promise. They sounded like a law of the universe being spoken aloud.

No one in the café dared to raise their eyes. The workers in the corner studied the patterns on their plates. The lady in the hat stared at a crack in her saucer. They were trying to disappear.

The radiola, tired witness to it all, gave a crackle and fell silent forever. The conversation was over.

Mari rose from the table, pushing the chair back neatly.

"It's time," she said to her companions. "They have their own Sovereign and Antichrist here, their own Great War. Everything returns to its cycle."

At that moment, the café windows were flooded with flat, blinding white light. It erased all colors, turning the houses outside into negatives.

On the horizon, slowly and inevitably, like a monstrous flower, a nuclear mushroom cloud was rising.

People stared at the window. Cigarettes burned to their filters between their fingers, newspapers lay forgotten. Their faces emptied out, and the light burned the last traces of humanity from them.

No one noticed that the table by the wall had become vacant. The three who had been sitting there vanished — as though they had never existed. The old man at the counter was gone as well.

And then the blast wave passed through, and the small provincial town ceased to exist.

Appendix

Chronology

1964 — birth of the Shooter.
1987 — birth of Eliza.
1997 — the metro shooting.
2010 — founding of BioTech, death of Eliza.
2081 — birth of Beverly and Jennifer.
2101 — the beginning of the Great War, death of Beverly and Jennifer.
2102 — birth of Mark.
2120 — the end of the Great War.
2140 — the events of the novel.